

**THE PAST AS IT APPEARED TO THOSE PRESENT: "CLASS" IN THE EYE
OF THE BEHOLDER IN 1930s AND 1940s NEW ZEALAND SOCIETY**

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this thesis is to gain a specific understanding of an important period of New Zealand's social history, from the perspective of people who were actually there. The focus is on how a range of New Zealanders living during the 1930s and 1940s defined, discussed, and disputed the significance of "class" in their society. There is a dearth of historical research about class and the social imagery of class in New Zealand, and particularly in relation to the 1930s and 1940s. While the dearth serves to highlight the uniqueness and value of this thesis, it also exacerbates the methodological and conceptual issues that are inevitably bound up in any study of class imagery. In an age where academics increasingly stress that class is no longer a relevant or worthwhile subject for research, how can the concept be gainfully employed? Do the present-day researcher's *a priori* assumptions about class inevitably impede finding out how the "insider", or New Zealanders in the past, understood class? Given the methodological problems of previous international class imagery research, and the almost invariable ambiguity of a class image, how can one attempt to bridge the gap between past and present understandings of class? These key questions are addressed throughout the study of a wide range of academic, polemical, political, official, personal, media, and fictional primary sources. Ultimately this thesis shows that in the New Zealand context, class imagery analysis, despite its inherent difficulties, provides much historical insight about national mentalities, myths, and rhetoric related to and about class. In a society that has traditionally prided itself on its egalitarianism and classlessness, this insight is especially intriguing.

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CONTENTS

Abstract	ii
Acknowledgements	iii
 <u>CHAPTER 1</u>	 1
Introduction: The International Historiography, Issues of Methodology, and the Concepts Surrounding the Study of “Class Imagery”	
 <u>CHAPTER 2</u>	 19
Image or Reality? The Local Historiography on Stratification	
 <u>CHAPTER 3</u>	 34
Academic and Polemical “Class” Imagery	
Introduction	
Sources	
Egalitarian Rhetoric and Overseas Yardsticks	
Rhetorical Traditions and Internal Diversity	
The “Middle-Class”	
Ideals and Realities of Inequality in Education and Politics	
“Workers” and the “Other Class”	
Class, Gender, and Race	
Conclusion	
 <u>CHAPTER 4</u>	 59
Official and Political “Class” Imagery	
Introduction and Sources	
Official Yearbooks	
Royal Commissions, Parliamentary Committees, and Committees of Inquiry	
Education and Labour Departmental Reports	
Parliamentary Debates and Government Published / Commissioned Reports	
Class, Gender, and Race	
Comparison and Contextualisation	
 <u>CHAPTER 5</u>	 84
Personal “Class” Imagery	
Introduction and Sources	
Egalitarianism, Community, and the “Middle-Class”	
Anti-Egalitarianism and “Workers”	
The Rhetoric of Respectability and Social Hierarchy	
The Aesthetics of Social Distinction	
The Question of Representation	
Class and Race	
Summary	

<u>CHAPTER 6</u>	108
Media “Class” Imagery	
Introduction and Sources	
Egalitarian Ideals and Inequality of Opportunity	
The Rhetoric of Social Distinction	
The Exclusiveness of “Society”	
Moral Distinctions, “Workers”, and the “Privileged”	
Conclusion	
 <u>CHAPTER 7</u>	 128
Fictional “Class” Imagery	
Introduction and Sources	
“Class” and Social Hierarchy	
Snobbery and the “Community”	
Social Aspiration and the Exclusive “Society”	
Them-and-Us and “Workers”	
Aesthetic Distinctions and “Workers”	
Those in the “Middle”	
Class and Race	
Summary	
 <u>CHAPTER 8</u>	 153
Conclusion	
 Bibliography	 164

Chapter 1

Introduction: The International Historiography, Issues of Methodology, and the Concepts Surrounding the Study of “Class Imagery”

The concept of “class”, according to the pronouncements of some academics, is dead.¹ David Cannadine notes how the reaction “against class analysis is now flowing so strongly that the most recent and authoritative social history of modern Britain...managed to leave out the subject completely, thereby giving an entirely new meaning to the injunction ‘class dismissed’ ”.² James Belich argues that in New Zealand, the “power of the myth of classlessness...is such that historians talking class risk being dismissed as frothing radicals or – still worse – as unfashionable”.³ The deterrents to studying class are strong. This is particularly so in a country that has traditionally prided itself on its egalitarianism and classlessness. Nonetheless, the claim mounted by this thesis is that class was, and is, an important subject for discussion in New Zealand. The focus is on the “class imagery” or the perceptions of inequality and social distinction articulated by a range of New Zealanders living during the 1930s and 1940s. The following analysis serves to reveal the considerable and varying extent to which New Zealanders in the past, who sought to interpret their society, considered class to be significant. It follows that class must at least be considered by those in the present who seek to understand New Zealand’s social history, and particularly this period. The issue is not the material experiences or “actualities” of class in the 1930s and 1940s according to academics. Rather, the aim is to find out what class meant to contemporaries. This provides a unique historical perspective on New Zealand meanings of inequality, snobbery, egalitarianism, and classlessness. It also suggests an answer to why class analysis, while beset with difficulties, should be considered far from lifeless.

¹ R. Crompton, *Class and Stratification: an Introduction to Current Debates*, Cambridge, 1998, p.98.

² D. Cannadine, *Class in Britain*, London, 2000, p.16.

³ J. Belich, *Paradise Reforged: a History of the New Zealanders From the 1880s to the Year 2000*, Auckland, 2001, p.126.

The objective of this chapter is to address the key methodological and conceptual issues surrounding the study of class imagery. In the process, the theoretical approach of this particular study, its source selection, its focus on the 1930s and 1940s, and its chapter layout and findings, are outlined and justified.

To summarise the similar approach of Arthur Marwick, the study of class imagery involves the examination of how “class, class structure, and class attitudes are perceived from within the societies studied themselves”.⁴ The value of studying class imagery is somewhat akin to the value of learning a foreign language or travelling through time. As Miles Fairburn points out, this kind of approach has “humanistic value”, for it “allows us to converse, at least to some extent, with the people of the past”. It is also, he adds, “inherently interesting”.⁵ The concept of a “class image” does not merely refer to a visual picture, such as advertisements. As Bernard Waites argues, class “imagery usually comes to us in the medium of language”, a language that is “connotative and allusive” and “evokes mental pictures”.⁶ This kind of qualitative or semiotic⁷ analysis is complicated. The defining characteristics of class images, the historiography warns, are incoherence, diversity, and contradiction. A single person’s class image, Howard Newby, Colin Bell, David Rose, and Peter Saunders caution, “will remain for the most part subjectively unexamined and largely taken for granted”.⁸ As Thomas Lasswell also cautions, the exploration of class imagery must be led by inference, for one cannot “know exactly the sentiments and connotations another attaches to even the most formally defined term”.⁹ The problem is exacerbated when focusing on a society. One will be dealing with what David Pearson terms a “*mélange* of beliefs, opinions and impressions which often appear amorphous but

⁴ A. Marwick, *Class: Image and Reality in Britain, France and the USA Since 1930*, Houndmills, 1990, p.12. As demonstrated in the various chapters, Marwick’s similar study was a valuable reference for this study, providing methodological guidelines and points of caution.

⁵ M. Fairburn, *Social History: Problems, Strategies and Methods*, Houndmills, 1999, p.232.

⁶ B. Waites, *A Class Society at War: England 1914-18*, Leamington Spa, 1987, p.35.

⁷ M.W. Steinberg, “Talkin’ Class: Discourse, Ideology, and Their Roles in Class Conflict”, in S.G. McNall, R.F. Levine, & R. Fantasia, eds, *Bringing Class Back in: Contemporary and Historical Perspectives*, Colorado, 1991, p.261.

⁸ H. Newby, C. Bell, D. Rose, & P. Saunders, *Property, Paternalism and Power: Class and Control in Rural England*, London, 1978, p.280.

⁹ T.E. Lasswell, *Class and Stratum: an Introduction to Concepts and Research*, Boston, 1965, p.123.

nevertheless are indicative of general assumptions about people's perceptions of...the society they live in".¹⁰ The assumption in this study of 1930s and 1940s New Zealand is not "that perfect reflections of the systems of inequality amidst which individuals live will be disclosed".¹¹ Rather, the aim is to dig for and interpret what Marwick terms the "unwitting testimony", or "the assumptions about class and social distinctions which are so much a commonplace to the people themselves that they are not even aware that what they are saying could have significance for a historian".¹²

A strong justification for this study, elaborated on in chapter two, is how class imagery remains largely uninvestigated in New Zealand.¹³ This is especially so in relation to the 1930s and 1940s. The major gap in local research about class and class imagery in this period points to the wide scope and need for original research. The international historiography also offers some important justifications. Anthony Coxon and Charles Jones observe that "whilst we know a great deal about the differences which social class makes in many areas, we know relatively little about how people actually perceive their social world and how social class fits into these perceptions".¹⁴ The question about how people in the past perceived the society in which they lived, Arlette Jouanna maintains, is now one of the most challenging facing historians.¹⁵

The examination of this question has the potential, as Michael Savage suggests, to breathe life into class analysis tradition.¹⁶ Savage observes that for those "not socialised into the particular interests of class theory", the main problem for this field "is not that the cupboard is bare, but rather that the items inside seem out of date". According to his view, what class theory lacks is any clear explanation "as to why and

¹⁰ D.G. Pearson, *Johnsonville: Continuity and Change in a New Zealand Township*, Sydney, 1979, pp.143-4.

¹¹ K. Roberts, F.G. Cook, S.C. Clark, & E. Semeonoff, *The Fragmentary Class Structure*, London, 1977, p.4.

¹² Marwick, p.12.

¹³ D.G. Pearson, "Class, Status, and Reminiscence: a Research Note", *New Zealand Journal of History* (NZJH), 3, 1, (1979), p.85.

¹⁴ A.P.M. Coxon & C.L. Jones, *Class and Hierarchy: the Social Meaning of Occupations*, New York, 1979, p.xi.

¹⁵ A. Jouanna, *Ordre Social: Mythes et Hierarchies dans la France du XVIe Siecle*, 1977, p.7; cit. P.N. Furbank, *Unholy Pleasure: or the Idea of Class*, Oxford, 1985, p.53.

¹⁶ M. Savage, *Class Analysis and Social Transformation*, Buckingham, 2000, p.8.

how class matters”.¹⁷ The study of class imagery is one important way of finding out whether and how class matters. Scott McNall, Rhonda Devine, and Rick Fantasia argue that class is “one of the most widely used and thoroughly contested concepts in the social sciences” and that there is still little agreement “on the exact meaning of class or the explanatory power of the word itself”.¹⁸ Yet as Savage points out, despite academic debate and disagreement over the concept, class will continue to matter if it is discovered that people, or the social actors, think it matters.¹⁹ According to E.P. Thompson, class “is defined by men [sic] as they live their own history, and, in the end, this is its only definition”.²⁰ Therefore, as Martin Burke suggests, rather than “offering an answer to the possibly unanswerable question of what is the correct concept of class”, it is time to examine how those in the past conceptualised and contested it.²¹

The notion that to have a focus on class imagery is to work with “a disembodied realm of ideas”, which “must be correlated to an ultimately determining reality” in order to produce academically solid findings, should be refuted.²² Then again, by granting primacy to “actors’ conceptions of class”, the desire of this study is not to “reduce complex social processes and political events to the actors’ versions of them”.²³ Particularly in chapter two, contextual and comparative references to the historiography’s version, or “externalist accounts”²⁴ of class in the 1930s and 1940s, are made. Yet this is only a secondary focus. As Anthony Coxon and Charles Jones caution, images of class are most usefully studied “*sui generis*”, and information about these images should not, and cannot, in general, be used to draw inferences about any “objective” structure that may exist.²⁵ This study can be loosely categorised as

¹⁷ Savage, p.20.

¹⁸ S.G. McNall, R.F. Levine, & R. Fantasia, “Introduction”, in S.G. McNall, R.F. Levine, & R. Fantasia, eds, *Bringing Class Back in: Contemporary and Historical Perspectives*, Colorado, 1991, p.1.

¹⁹ Savage, p.23.

²⁰ E.P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class*, Harmondsworth, 1968, pp.10-11.

²¹ M.J. Burke, *The Comundrum of Class: Public Discourse on the Social Order in America*, Chicago, 1995, p.xvii; M.R. Jackman & R.W. Jackman, *Class Awareness in the United States*, Berkeley, 1983, p.13.

²² Burke, p.xvii.

²³ Burke, p.xvii.

²⁴ Fairburn, *Social History*, p.207.

²⁵ A.P.M. Coxon & C.L. Jones, *The Images of Occupational Prestige: a Study in Social Cognition*, London,

“hermeneutic”²⁶ history, which concentrates on subjective or “insider” views of society. The point is not that this relatively new history is necessarily better than other more mainstream types. Rather, the point is that the study of class imagery is capable of enhancing understanding of New Zealand’s history without being subsidised by traditional forms in order to be deemed valid.

There is, however, a major problem with this hermeneutic approach to class analysis. The problem goes beyond the typically inchoate nature of class imagery. Savage warns how in class imagery research “there is a danger that...the deep conceptual, methodological and empirical uncertainties around the conception of class...are not faced up to”.²⁷ Joan Wallach Scott also cautions how “we cannot write about class without interrogating its meanings”.²⁸ In other words, concentration on how contemporaries have understood class does not really sidestep the issue of how the researcher first understood it. What exactly is the class imagery analyst looking for? How does one decide what “class” is, or recognise class when one sees it? Marwick is strongly criticised for the “confusion which underlies his analysis” over whether “class is whatever people say it is” or more an objectively defined “cluster of attributes”.²⁹ Marwick maintains in his introduction that the class labels used in an analysis “should be ones which would make sense to people living in the societies being investigated, rather than abstractions imposed from outside in accordance with some *a priori* theory”.³⁰ But it is difficult to avoid the fact that the researcher has already made an assumption about what to look for, even by starting with the term “class”.³¹ Just “how much of our own images of society and our own consciousness come into our

1978, p.193.

²⁶ M. Fairburn, “A Discourse on Critical Method”, NZJH, 25, 2, (1991), p.158.

²⁷ Savage, p.8.

²⁸ J.W. Scott, “Women in *The Making of the English Working Class*”, in J.W. Scott, ed., *Gender and the Politics of History*, New York, 1999, p.90.

²⁹ M.B. Katz, “Review: A. Marwick, *Class: Image and Reality in Britain, France and the USA Since 1930*”, *Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, 12, 2, (1981), p.366.

³⁰ Marwick, p.273.

³¹ T.H. Marshall, *Citizenship and Social Class and Other Essays*, London, 1950, p.88.

understanding and evaluation of data, images and consciousness as expressed by ‘them’”, as Willener acknowledges, “is never irrelevant, nor easily specified”.³²

Surely historical analysis is more than a misinformed fumbling in the dark. A compromise needs to be reached in the oscillation between two key problems; the influence of the researcher’s *a priori* understanding of class and the unknown insiders’ class criteria. To quote Fairburn, the investigator should aim to “translate the conceptual world of another society into terms which make sense to the members of the translator’s audience but which accurately reflect their original meanings”.³³ The problems of understanding the “original meanings” of class in 1930s and 1940s New Zealand are lessened by being aware of a basic but fundamental point. “Class” was invented neither in this period nor in this country. Some of the contemporary theories and concepts of class were likely to be part of a long-established and ongoing rhetorical tradition. The contention of this thesis is that class is a historically constructed, dynamic language, which New Zealanders in the 1930s and 1940s inherited and to which they contributed.

It is a logical initial hypothesis and a consistent finding in a number of the sources examined. To an extent, the present is always influenced by the past: by the people and their beliefs, the myths, and the traditions. Part of the uniqueness and “originality” of what class meant to people living in the 1930s and 1940s lies in their decision, deliberately or unconsciously, to adapt, modify, and react against these inheritances within the local context. One should be careful not to over-infer the degree of influence and awareness of a rhetorical tradition of class on contemporary thinking. Nonetheless, the inheritances, and their local adaptations, are noticeable in a number of the sources examined. In particular, the influences of Marxist class theory, traditional egalitarian rhetoric, and nineteenth-century pioneer reactions against Old World “class evils” are detected.

³² A. Willener, “Images, Action, ‘Us’ and ‘Them’ ”, in M. Bulmer, ed., *Working-Class Images of Society*, London, 1975, p.190.

³³ Fairburn, *Social History*, p.218.

Thompson, Asa Briggs, John Scott, and Cannadine provide helpful summaries of the different definitions of “class” that were currently available and possibly influential during the 1930s and 1940s. In the context of British history, they trace the shifts from understanding class as a purely objective social category or classificatory device, to viewing class in terms of the consciousness, distinctions, and relationships between individuals and groups.³⁴ Awareness of this rhetorical tradition of class aids the process of recognising and comprehending how New Zealand contemporaries defined class. Government officials, for instance, tended to use the term “class” only in the sense of a classificatory device that was apparently devoid of connotations of inequality and social distinctions. While they may be part of rhetorical tradition, these different understandings of class are given unique meaning in the New Zealand context. As revealed in chapter four, the official use of the term “class” gives the impression that society was untroubled by class conflict and consciousness, and implicitly sustains the notion of New Zealand’s egalitarianism.

There also exists a plethora of colloquial and academic terms commonly and traditionally associated with class, such as references to status, occupational divisions, and inequality, and terms like “snob” and “working-class”. In the initial research stage, these were very loosely implemented as a kind of provisional dictionary, or as some linguistic indicators about what contemporary class imagery could look like. The process is rather like travelling to a foreign country equipped with a dictionary in which the foreign translations, and coinages, have yet to be written. Yet there is a danger that this “frankly exploratory”³⁵ search for languages of class obscures other equally important and related languages of social distinction. The premise that class is a salient part of people’s social imagery, Patrick Joyce argues, thwarts the “ability to take stock of the existence of social identities and shared visions of the social order

³⁴ See: A. Briggs, “The Language of ‘Class’ in Early Nineteenth-Century England”, in M.W. Flinn & T.C. Smout, eds, *Essays in Social History*, London, 1974, pp.154-77; Cannadine, pp.1-23; J. Scott, *Stratification and Power: Structures of Class, Status, and Command*, Cambridge, 1996, pp.3-5; Thompson, pp.9-12.

³⁵ F.M. Martin, “Some Subjective Aspects of Social Stratification”, in D.V. Glass, ed., *Social Mobility in Britain*, London, 1954, p.51.

that did not emerge from, nor derive their legitimacy from, the language of class”.³⁶ Researchers such as Joyce make a good point about the complexity of social differentiations. In order to be able to understand the contemporary significance or indeed insignificance of class, the search parameters need to be as wide as possible. Contemporary meanings of class are still the major focus of this study. Nevertheless, in order to comprehend these meanings, the examination of economic, moral, and cultural distinctions that directly or loosely relate to class, is also a preoccupation. Notably also, perceptions of classlessness are taken into critical account.

One should be aware of, but not intimidated by, the possible limitations of class imagery analysis. To paraphrase Clifford Geertz, the present-day researcher does not, and largely cannot, perceive what the 1930s and 1940s New Zealander perceived about class.³⁷ Indeed, as Geertz points out, “what we call our data are really our own constructions of other people’s constructions....There is nothing particularly wrong with this, and it is in any case inevitable”.³⁸ E.D. Hirsch argues that a “pre-understanding is a vague hypothesis that is constitutive of understanding”.³⁹ In this study, the provisional dictionary and awareness of a rhetorical tradition should be seen as a vague hypothesis, rather than as inflexible “abstractions imposed from outside”.⁴⁰ This allows much room for the insiders’ own understandings to meet, surprise, and upset the pre-understandings. An unexpected discovery, for example, is that the contemporaries examined tended not to use the term “middle-class”. The researcher’s “preconception”, as Svante Nordin points out, can be “revised all the time during the process of reading – or even discarded altogether and replaced...[like] the ladder that we throw away after we have climbed”.⁴¹ According to Christopher Lloyd, “successful

³⁶ P. Joyce, *Visions of the People: Industrial England and the Question of Class, 1848-1914*, Cambridge, 1991, cit. C. Waters, “Review: P. Joyce, *Visions of the People: Industrial England and the Question of Class, 1848-1914*”, *Social History*, 17, 3, (1992), p.513. See also: R. Scase, *Class*, Minneapolis, 1992, p.1.

³⁷ C. Geertz, “From the Native’s Point of View: on the Nature of Anthropological Understanding”, in C. Geertz, ed., *Local Knowledge: Further Essays in Interpretive Anthropology*, New York, 1983, p.58.

³⁸ C. Geertz, “Thick Description: Toward an Interpretive Theory of Culture”, in C. Geertz, ed., *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays*, New York, 1973, p.9.

³⁹ E.D. Hirsch, *Validity in Interpretation*, New Haven, 1967, pp.261-2.

⁴⁰ Marwick, p.273.

⁴¹ S. Nordin, *Interpretation and Method: Studies in the Explication of Literature*, Sweden, 1978, p.83.

communication implies sharing meanings and identifications”.⁴² The idea of “shared understanding” denotes the necessary compromise in communication between past and present. Ultimately, the plausible aim of this study is to make the “interpretive understanding of understandings”⁴³ about class broadly recognisable to both contemporary and present-day societies.

The international historiography suggests a way of making sense of the “complex and nebulous”⁴⁴ class imagery data. The clue lies in seeking what Elizabeth Bott describes as the strains of consistency and continuity,⁴⁵ or what Marwick calls shared assumptions and common denominators in class imagery.⁴⁶ In other words, the dual aim of this study is to uncover the meanings of class according to different contemporaries, and to discover their common ground. Until recently, researchers’ aims of interpreting the strains of consistency in class imagery tended to result in the imposition of rigid or ideal typologies and the misrepresentation of complex data.⁴⁷ To avoid repeating past mistakes, the problems and criticisms of the international historiography on class imagery must be reviewed.

Sociological and historical class imagery research, based mostly on oral sources such as opinion polls and interviews, was particularly popular in the 1960s and 1970s. Coxon and Jones concede that the literature on the images of stratification has “certainly been rich”. What they also observe is how “the evidence which underpins it turns out to be thin indeed, consisting to a very considerable extent of simple commentary by sociologists upon judiciously selected quotations from interviews”.⁴⁸ Researchers tended to use “pre-determined class categories” like “upper class, middle class, and lower class”, and “forced-choice questions” such as “To which social class

⁴² C. Lloyd, *Explanation in Social History*, Oxford, 1986, p.159.

⁴³ Lloyd, p.263.

⁴⁴ S. Encel, “Class and Status”, in A.F. Davies & S. Encel, eds, *Australian Society: a Sociological Introduction*, Melbourne, 1965, p.179.

⁴⁵ E. Bott, *Family and Social Network: Roles, Norms, and External Relationships in Ordinary Urban Families*, London, 1968, p.171.

⁴⁶ Marwick, p.13.

⁴⁷ P. Hiller, “The Nature and Social Location of Everyday Conceptions of Class”, *Sociology*, 9, 1, (1975), p.6.

⁴⁸ Coxon & Jones, *Occupational Prestige*, p.17.

would you say you belonged?”.⁴⁹ According to Hiller, this “often resulted in the gross oversimplification or outright distortion of respondents’ views”.⁵⁰ Another “important defect” of the historiography, as Coxon and P.M. Davies comment, is the often unspoken assumption of researchers that a person can be characterised as having one dominant and communicable ‘image’.⁵¹ By contrast, researchers such as Howard Newby found that people have “a multiplicity of images and half-formed beliefs and opinions which did not add up to any single coherent image”.⁵² The tradition of using “ideal type models” of class imagery, which neatly and precisely interpreted an individual or entire society’s perceptions, is well established.⁵³ Arguably, the tradition has tended to reveal much about researchers’, and less about respondents’, class assumptions.

Again, the problem is one of hermeneutics and methodology. The “insider” or social actor in the past has much to offer the present-day researcher about their understandings of the social structure. Yet the conversation cannot, and in some ways should not, be one-sided. The purely hermeneutic approach, as Fairburn cautions, “is not designed to deal with entities, events, states of affairs and structures that affect societies and that they cannot either conceive or adequately explain”.⁵⁴ Under such conditions, Fairburn argues, “it is perfectly legitimate to use our concepts embodied in our theories to describe and explain the society”. In his view, “we usually have more information about these things than the insiders did since we have had more opportunity than they to observe more cases”.⁵⁵ Waites also suggests that the contemporary source “materials are so profuse and diverse that they cannot be approached without categories (which are at least incipiently theoretical) of class imagery and some notion of their determination and function”.⁵⁶ Nearly every modern

⁴⁹ J.H. Goldthorpe & D. Lockwood, “Affluence and the British Class Structure”, *Sociological Review*, 11, 2, (1963), pp.143-4; Hiller, pp.5-6.

⁵⁰ Hiller, p.6.

⁵¹ See: A.P.M. Coxon & P.M. Davies, *Images of Social Stratification: Occupational Structures and Class*, London, 1986, pp.163-64.

⁵² H. Newby, *The Deferential Worker: a Study of Farm Workers in East Anglia*, London, 1977, pp.387-8.

⁵³ Pearson, *Johnsonville*, p.138.

⁵⁴ Fairburn, *Social History*, p.234.

⁵⁵ Fairburn, *Social History*, p.233.

⁵⁶ Waites, p.36.

researcher of class imagery has stressed that people's perceptions of class tend to be unexamined, implicit, or ambiguous. It follows, then, that the researcher may be forced to make use of modern tools of analysis. This has the potential, of course, both to impinge on and aid the explication of original meaning.

The problems of previous typologies and the difficulties of interpreting class imagery without them, is a double bind that needs resolving. The authors of *The Fragmentary Class Structure* conclude that class imagery research remains in its infancy because there are "no typologies whose utility has been convincingly demonstrated".⁵⁷ Nevertheless, as they point out, the historiography "enables us to recognise the dimensions along which class images are likely to vary" or correspond.⁵⁸ In a way, the class imagery historiography is itself a rhetorical tradition of which the researcher needs to be aware. Pearson's approach is to "provide impressions of the form and degree of class awareness" by loosely drawing on the models of class imagery offered in the historiography, and indicating their "prevalence and form of usage".⁵⁹ Similarly, American researchers Reeve Vanneman and Lynn Cannon suggest looking "for general *tendencies* in constructing class images rather than trying to identify complete models that precisely fit".⁶⁰ Without even looking at how 1930s and 1940s New Zealanders perceived class, these researchers reveal how the need for only loose employment of the models offered in the historiography is paramount.

So what are some of the likely meanings or general tendencies suggested by researchers? Despite the variation in proffered typologies, Pearson observes how there is some unanimity among researchers on "the *scale* of images covered", and particularly those "positions commonly adopted at the extremities".⁶¹ Broadly speaking, researchers have found that three general "images" or assumptions tend to dominate people's descriptions and definitions of class and their society. The interesting finding of this study is that despite much variation, the three broad

⁵⁷ Roberts *et al*, pp.6-7.

⁵⁸ Roberts *et al*, p.8.

⁵⁹ Pearson, *Johnsonville*, p.138.

⁶⁰ R. Vanneman & L.W. Cannon, *The American Perception of Class*, Philadelphia, 1987, p.108.

⁶¹ Pearson, *Johnsonville*, p.139.

“images” are also popular, if not predominant, in contemporary perceptions of 1930s and 1940s New Zealand.

The first main type of image or model, which is emphasised by the historiography as fundamental to understanding people’s perceptions of class, relates to descriptions of class in fairly rigid dichotomous terms.⁶² People subscribing to a dichotomous “class model”, Stanislaw Ossowski argues, hold “a generalization for the entire society of a two-term asymmetric relation in which one side is privileged at the expense of the other”.⁶³ According to Ossowski, three types of dichotomous or “them-and-us” distinctions are usually made. First, society is seen as divided between “the rulers and the ruled”, which is usually defined as a “division of power or authority”. Alternatively, society is seen as divided between “the rich and the poor”, or the “haves” and “have-nots”, which is “an economic differentiation, dividing those who own wealth or property from those who do not”. The third dichotomous representation is a division between “those for whom others work and those who work,” which is a “separation emphasising the *exploitation* of one group by another”.⁶⁴

In extreme contrast to dichotomous images, classless images of society are also common and popular, according to the findings of many researchers. The “classless model” relates to when class is rejected by people “as meaningless, or severely diluted by the fact that everyone is seen as belonging to the same class”. As Pearson explains, “the very notion of a class society, dichotomous or hierarchical, is severely modified or disowned”.⁶⁵ As researchers also point out, people sometimes talk about class in a purely classificatory or harmonious sense. These kinds of *classless* images have been called functional or “classes-without-conflict” models. Another relevant *classless* model is the “ordinary/snobbishness dichotomy”. People subscribing to this image or “model” tend to divide society “into those who are snobbish and those who are not”, which usually involves the identification of only two groups, “a small snobbish

⁶² This is termed the “power model” or “them-and-us dichotomous class model”. See: Newby *et al*, p.277.

⁶³ S. Ossowski, *Class Structure in the Social Consciousness*, London, 1963, p.31.

⁶⁴ Ossowski, p.23; A. Giddens, *The Class Structure of the Advanced Societies*, London, 1973, pp.63-64.

⁶⁵ Pearson, *Johnsonville*, p.141.

one”⁶⁶ and the “ordinary majority”.⁶⁷ This model “is derived at least partly from equalitarian ideology”, Hiller notes, because the right of people to claim status is either denied or criticised.⁶⁸ But an implicit inequality and dichotomy between “them and us” is still apparent, as Alan Davies points out. The “few and unimportant them” are usually seen as those “snobs” or “social climbers” at the very top, and those “very poor” or “no-hopers” right at the bottom.⁶⁹ The tendency of people who perceive their society in terms of an “ordinary-snobbishness model” is to ignore these “remote groups on the periphery”,⁷⁰ and to privilege those who are “ordinary” or “normal”.⁷¹ In some respects, Savage concludes, this model “profoundly undermines the salience of class”. Yet Savage also observes how this shying away from class may also invoke “class, since ordinariness only means something if contrasted with the non-ordinary – the snobs for instance”. Class can be used as a reference category, as he explains, which people use to differentiate themselves from others.⁷² In short, the researcher must be aware that class may have significant meaning even in images of classlessness.

Finally, according to the historiography, in between these two extreme “images” lies a wide range of personal perceptions of class in terms of hierarchy. These “hierarchical models”,⁷³ at least as researchers interpret them, incorporate the notions of a social hierarchy based on achieved or ascribed status, and an economic hierarchy based on wealth, income, or occupation.⁷⁴ The notions are often interconnected. Social mobility and weak class boundaries are often provided as explanations for movement up and down the hierarchy. A general awareness of the range of typologies offered in the historiography provides some useful references to what might be found and how the findings could be interpreted in this study. In referring to these models, as Brian

⁶⁶ Hiller, p.10.

⁶⁷ A.F. Davies, *Images of Class: an Australian Study*, Sydney, 1967, p.14.

⁶⁸ Hiller, p.10.

⁶⁹ Davies, p.14.

⁷⁰ Davies, p.14.

⁷¹ Savage, p.115.

⁷² Savage, pp.115-17.

⁷³ Pearson, *Johnsonville*, p.139.

⁷⁴ Pearson, *Johnsonville*, pp.140-41.

Graetz cautions, one should be careful to avoid making the “unsubstantiated assertion that class images must reflect some given, concrete, and external social reality consisting of obvious gradations and cleavages”. Rather, the suggestion accepted in this study is that class imagery “may not consist of hierarchical gradations at all, and...may even omit ‘social classes’ themselves”.⁷⁵

Another way of avoiding the problems of previous class imagery research is to focus on different primary sources. There are few specific international studies based on the kind of historical data employed in this local analysis. The exception is Marwick’s study of *Class: Image and Reality in Britain, France and the USA Since 1930*, which is critically consulted throughout the following chapters. To paraphrase Marwick, the question of class representation has been approached through the study of five “sets” of images “which arise naturally from the different kinds of available source material”. Marwick classifies four sets of images: “academic and polemical”, “official”, “private and unpublished”, and “media and fictional”.⁷⁶ This basic classification has been adopted and modified. An examination of the perceptions held by academics and polemical writers, sourced from a wide range of texts and treatises on New Zealand society, is undertaken in chapter three. In chapter four, the perceptions of a range of public servants, politicians, and other government officials are analysed, derived from sources such as the *Appendices to the Journals of the House of Representatives*. The fifth chapter signifies the switch from a focus on more educated and official views to looking at how contemporaries, in a more personal and informal sense, perceived the social structure. The “images” of a range of people, from early pioneers and bank managers to nurses, farmers, and journalists, are examined through the reading of contemporary autobiographies, reminiscences, and informal social commentaries. In chapter six, the editorials, letters to the editor, advertisements, and women’s pages in the newspaper *Truth* are sampled for a particular “media” perspective of 1930s and 1940s New Zealand. Finally, in chapter seven, the perceptions of professional and amateur fictional writers are looked at through the reading of a range of popular and

⁷⁵ B. Graetz, *Images of Class in Australia. Equality, Rank and Status*, Canberra, 1987, p.38-39.

⁷⁶ Marwick, p.38.

critically acclaimed novels and short stories. In each chapter, the purposes and the likely audiences or intended readers of all these different sources are critically inferred and considered.

Further specificities of, and justifications for, the source selection are discussed in each chapter. In general, the aim is that each of the sets examined will contribute to the building up of what Marwick calls an overall “cultural map of class”.⁷⁷ The metaphor of map-building signifies a kind of layering effect. The researcher, and the reader, begins with virtually no understanding, and then gradually builds up from the first until the last chapter a range of different and shared contemporary understandings about class. To use Marwick’s terms, the map is not “the creation of any single perception or group of perceptions”,⁷⁸ and no set of images is privileged over another. Ideally, the map would be broadly recognisable, to those in the present and the past, as a valid reconstruction of how people perceived or talked about class in New Zealand during the 1930s and 1940s.

Yet a limitation does exist in that literary or written primary sources are the focus of this study. Many of the voices behind the chosen sources are at least literate and probably educated. They may therefore be unrepresentative of New Zealanders in general. As Pearson observes, the social histories “of most working people, not to speak of the more fortunate in New Zealand, remain unrecorded [and] thus any reconstruction of their past has to be inferred from such letters, diaries, and newspapers as still remain”.⁷⁹ The use of oral sources, however, is problematic. One cannot literally talk to someone living in the 1930s and 1940s. The likely influence of present-day languages and assumptions about class also makes the use of present-day reminiscences inevitably problematic. As a result, this study is based on what people wrote, which is not necessarily the weaker option. Pearson argues that in class imagery analysis, a great danger exists in “over-reliance on reminiscences to bolster our own theoretical preconceptions of what society was or should be like, or glib denials of the

⁷⁷ Marwick, p.12.

⁷⁸ Marwick, p.12.

⁷⁹ Pearson, “Class, Status, and Reminiscence”, p.85.

utility of using a potentially vital source of information where other forms of evidence are totally lacking”.⁸⁰ Given that a lot of evidence is totally lacking, these available sources of information are potentially vital. These perceptions of social distinction are already written: by, within, and for, 1930s and 1940s New Zealand society. The terminology and theories are influenced only by a rhetorical tradition of class and by the contemporary context, rather than by the questions of a present-day interview. By including a wide range of sources, the aim is to achieve as representative a study as possible. Notwithstanding the problem of *a priori* assumptions, this provides much scope for interpreting “original meanings”.⁸¹

Given the period and context in which they were written, these sources or “original meanings” are especially intriguing. The interrelated notions of “image” and “reality”, to use Marwick’s terms, are difficult to divorce. The focus of this thesis is on how contemporaries talked about this period of New Zealand’s history rather than how they actually lived in it; on what appeared to be happening rather than what actually happened during the 1930s and 1940s. Nevertheless, as Marwick argues, “classes, their nature, attitudes about them and relationships between them, are subject also to particular events and particular political actions...class influences historical developments and in turn is affected by these developments”.⁸² The years 1930-1949 are an intrinsically interesting benchmark period in twentieth-century New Zealand history. Major historical developments were occurring politically, economically, legislatively, and culturally. New Zealanders living during this time “endured a massive Depression and yet another world war”, or what Erik Olssen calls a “tidal wave of human suffering”.⁸³ They also witnessed the coming to power of a political party with socialist origins,⁸⁴ the emergence of the Welfare State with its social security and state housing schemes, and the influence of “cultural nationalism” and

⁸⁰ Pearson, “Class, Status, and Reminiscence”, p.87.

⁸¹ Fairburn, *Social History*, p.218.

⁸² Marwick, p.373.

⁸³ See: E. Olssen, “Depression and War (1939-41)”, in K. Sinclair, ed., *The Oxford Illustrated History of New Zealand*, Auckland, 1996, p.211.

⁸⁴ See: M. Fairburn, “The Farmers Take Over (1912-30)”, in K. Sinclair, ed., *The Oxford Illustrated History of New Zealand*, Auckland, 1996, pp.185-209.

“social realism”⁸⁵ in the arts. The severing of links with Britain, an intensified desire for security and community, and a heightened sense of nationhood⁸⁶ and distinctiveness are associated significant developments. The developments are strong clues as to what one might find about contemporary perceptions of class and society. By glancing at the wider context, it is plausible to suggest that there will be heightened awareness of, and discussion about, not only inequality and social distinction but also egalitarianism and classlessness. The period 1930-1949 provides an intriguing frame and justification for the local study of class imagery.

This tour through the methodological and conceptual issues surrounding the following investigation has helped to clarify, contextualise, and validate its focus and aims. In chapter two, the New Zealand historiography on class is discussed. This provides further contextual detail, but also an important point of contrast, to the subsequent examination of contemporary class imagery.

Between the introductory and conclusionary chapters many different languages of social distinction and ideas related to and about class are traced. In chapter three, for example, the struggle to utilise and see the relevance of inherited class theories and egalitarian rhetoric in the local context is revealed by the idiosyncrasies and tensions in academic and polemical discussions of society. Economic distinctions and definitions of class in terms of money and associated status are repeatedly made in these sources. In chapter four, the strength of an egalitarian ethos, and the apparent irrelevance or contentiousness of class is demonstrated by the seeming reticence of public servants and politicians to discuss inequality. Conversely, in the sources examined in chapter five, the expounding of anti-egalitarian notions and the denigration of “workers” are found to be consistent themes. The inference drawn is that many of the personal primary sources are highly unrepresentative, and that both their focus and intended audiences were unashamedly exclusive. Moral and physical distinctions are often made in these sources to justify the elevation of the apparently

⁸⁵ Olssen, pp.218-19.

⁸⁶ Olssen, p.211.

more respectable and better-looking wealthy and privileged members of society. In the examination of *Truth* in chapter six, the explicit criticism of privilege and the moral elevation of “workers” are found to be oddly concurrent with the envy and adulation of the elite. Finally, the fictional sources looked at in chapter seven tie up and elaborate on many enduring themes: the reticence and ambiguity in discussing class, the importance placed on the notion of “community”, the envy of and repugnance towards the elite, and the considerable social prestige yet low economic status of being a “worker”.

The overarching argument is that despite the overwhelming, even unthinking, belief in egalitarianism and the classless community, contemporary New Zealanders did recognise inequalities and forms of social differentiation.⁸⁷ Class, as a category and as a description of inequality and social relationships, had varying but undoubtedly significant meaning for many of the contemporaries examined. This thesis is an attempt to demonstrate that the study of the social imagery of class, despite its inherent difficulties, can provide unique and original insight on the history, and even the psyche, of New Zealand.

⁸⁷ Pearson, *Johnsonville*, p.143.

Chapter 2

Image or Reality? The Local Historiography on Stratification

Although the focus of the thesis is on the contemporary “imagery” of class, it is useful to first critically synthesise the apparent contemporary “actualities” of class. In this chapter, the mostly modern local historiography is briefly reviewed to see how outsiders, or researchers, have talked about the existence and significance of class, or stratification in general, in the context of 1930s and 1940s New Zealand society. This review enriches the subsequent study of how insiders, or contemporaries, perceived class, and anchors the images in a historical context. The accounts of researchers who have referred to the existence of class in the 1930s and 1940s in terms of occupational structure, institutions, income, work, and lifestyle are discussed. The findings of researchers who have examined class in terms of contemporary perceptions and doctrine, and the few who have specifically studied class imagery, are also noted. A key point about the historiography is the ambivalence often displayed by researchers in distinguishing between contemporary rhetoric and ideologies of class, and the realities or material existence of class. As suggested in this chapter, the ambivalence may be due to the tendency of researchers to use both “objective” and “subjective” source material in forming conclusions. It is evident in the predominant assumption that New Zealand society during this period was egalitarian and largely classless. Several other general themes or common assumptions about class in the contemporary context, such as the interpretation of a class-based, two-party political system and the classification of the social structure in terms of three main classes, are examined. Despite being only a minor focus, this preliminary discussion allows one to draw some interesting connections upon reaching the conclusion of the thesis. How different are the perceptions of class in 1930s and 1940s New Zealand in the historiography from the perceptions of those actually in that society? Through the comparison and contrast, knowledge about stratification within the context of 1930s and 1940s New Zealand society as it appeared to those present, and also as it appears to those in the present, is increased.

Some limitations of the field must first be noted. One of the main problems with the historiography is the wide gap in knowledge about class and social distinction in relation to New Zealand's history, and particularly in relation to the 1930s and 1940s. As Erik Olssen observes, relatively little research has been carried out in New Zealand "about the history of vertical and horizontal mobility, social stratification, [and] income distribution".¹ Until recently, according to David Pearson, the existing scanty research on stratification has tended "to be largely ahistorical, over-generalised, and consequently open to the distortions of over-simplified extrapolations from particular events or fragments of literary evidence".² Recent research such as Olssen's comprehensive study of occupational stratification and social mobility in Caversham from the 1880s to the 1920s³ is remedying this problem. Yet the problem persists in that such research is largely extraneous to the 1930s and 1940s and thus also to this thesis. From the 1950s onwards, there have been an increasing number of sociological studies on status, occupational stratification, and the subjective experiences of different socioeconomic groups.⁴ Two examples are the work by Athol Congalton and Robert Havighurst in using "occupations and residential prestige ratings in generating levels of stratification"⁵ and Barry Smith's opinion poll research in the 1970s on the subjective importance of social class.⁶ Overall, though, even this information is largely inapplicable. Most of the research is not directly about, or was carried out after, the 1930s and 1940s. That researchers in general fail to provide much explanation of class in New Zealand society, especially regarding this period, is both a challenge and justification for this investigation.

¹ E. Olssen, "The 'Working Class' in New Zealand", *New Zealand Journal of History* (NZJH), 8, 1, (1974), p.44.

² D.G. Pearson, "Small-Town Capitalism and Stratification in New Zealand, 1880-1930", NZJH, 14, 2, (1980), p.107.

³ See: E. Olssen, *Building the New World: Work, Politics, and Society in Caversham, 1880s-1920s*, Auckland, 1995.

⁴ A point made by D. Pitt, "Are There Social Classes in New Zealand?", in D. Pitt, ed., *Social Class in New Zealand*, Auckland, 1977, pp.6-7.

⁵ See: A.A. Congalton & R.J. Havighurst, "Status Rankings of Occupations in New Zealand", *Australian Journal of Psychology*, 6, 1, (1954), pp.10-15; cit. C. Wilkes, P. Davis, D. Tait, & P. Chrisp, *The New Zealand Class Structure: the Demographics of Class*, Palmerston North, 1985, p.7.

⁶ See: B. Smith, *Subjective Social Class, Social Mobility, and Attributional Dimensions: a New Zealand Study*, Auckland, 1976.

As indicated in chapter one, another important justification is the fact that class imagery remains largely uninvestigated in the local context.⁷ There are some exceptions, such as Pearson's revealing study in the 1970s of stratification and social imagery in Johnsonville,⁸ Congalton's work in the 1950s on male adolescents' consciousness of social class,⁹ and Athol McCredie's study of working-class images in New Zealand art.¹⁰ In general, though, as Peter Davis concludes, "very little systematic work has been carried out on the social imagery of class".¹¹ The few researchers who have broached the topic, Davis adds, are in agreement that "class imagery in this country is rather incoherent and ill-formed".¹² The typical conclusion, illustrated by Pearson and David Thorns, is that class "imagery in New Zealand is invariably inchoate and heavily influenced by ideologies of egalitarianism and community".¹³ While most local class imagery studies have been focused outside the time frame of this study,¹⁴ at least they have provided a general conclusion that can be tested.

The findings are varied among those researchers who have referred, if only in passing, to stratification within the context of 1930s and 1940s New Zealand. Nevertheless, some common or broad themes can be extrapolated. A major shared assumption in the historiography is the conviction that New Zealand society was egalitarian and even class-free in this period. Indeed, as Chris Wilkes, Peter Davis, David Tait, and Peter Chrisp note, in "a society, which, from its colonial period, stressed the ideology of egalitarianism, it is not surprising that the study of class and inequality is undeveloped".¹⁵ As Wilkes *et al* observe, historians frequently attest to "the limited role that class and class struggle play" in New Zealand's

⁷ D.G. Pearson, "Class, Status and Reminiscence: a Research Note", NZJH, 13, 1, (1979), p.85.

⁸ D.G. Pearson, *Johnsonville: Continuity and Change in a New Zealand Township*, Sydney, 1979.

⁹ A.A. Congalton, *Social Class Consciousness in Adolescents*, Wellington, 1952.

¹⁰ A. McCredie, "Picturing a Working Class", in G. Burke & A. Calhoun, eds, *Art and Organised Labour: Images of Working Life and Trade Union Life in New Zealand*, Wellington, 1990, pp.11-22.

¹¹ P. Davis, "Stratification and Class", in P. Spoonley, D.G. Pearson, & I. Shirley, eds, *New Zealand: Sociological Perspectives*, Palmerston North, 1982, p.134.

¹² Davis, p.134.

¹³ D.G. Pearson & D.C. Thorns, *Eclipse of Equality: Social Stratification in New Zealand*, Sydney, 1983, p.254.

¹⁴ An exception is Pearson's Johnsonville study. Pearson uses different primary source material (oral history, for instance), and has a more general historical focus. Where relevant, some of his findings about the 1930s and 1940s are discussed in this chapter and throughout the following study.

¹⁵ Wilkes *et al*, p.7.

history.¹⁶ In the historiography's interpretation of 1930s and 1940s New Zealand, the constant emphasis on homogeneity or only small socioeconomic differences underpins the dominant egalitarian ideology. In her research on wealth and income distribution from around 1870 to 1939, Margaret Galt concludes that the "evidence suggests that New Zealand was correctly portrayed as having a high level of wealth with an egalitarian distribution".¹⁷ Ian Reid, in a literature review regarding the 1930s, also maintains that the "items of evidence cited tend to indicate that New Zealand...was a highly uniform community, relatively deficient in stratification".¹⁸ Pearson and Thorns maintain that from the late 1930s to the mid 1960s there "was sustained growth in the economy accompanied by a gradual rising standard of living".¹⁹ They argue that these processes, together with the "effects of wartime rationing...led to a renewed fostering of the belief that New Zealand was a very egalitarian society with relatively small differences".²⁰

As Pearson and Thorns' argument illustrates, distinctions between interpretations of the contemporary belief in, and the actuality of, classlessness are often blurred or at least imprecise in the historiography. Reid observes of 1930s New Zealand society that "although anyone writing there could conceivably have produced work which exposed and emphasised such strata as did exist in his society, in fact its predominant homogeneity was the pattern he [sic] perceived and represented".²¹ At least in Reid's case, the imprecision may be because impressionistic or anecdotal "items of evidence" within the contemporary society have been used to make objective comments about its "deficient stratification".²² The strength of the ideology, if not also the pervasive reality, of egalitarianism during the 1930s and 1940s is a claim clearly made by researchers. McCredie observes that "[w]hatever the social reality...there has always been a persistent and widespread *belief* that we are not class divided but an egalitarian nation".²³ The long-standing conviction,

¹⁶ Wilkes *et al*, p.7.

¹⁷ M.N. Galt, "Wealth and Income in New Zealand, c1870 to c1939", PhD thesis, Victoria University of Wellington, 1985, abstract.

¹⁸ I. Reid, *Fiction and the Great Depression: Australia and New Zealand, 1930-1950*, Melbourne, 1979, p.28.

¹⁹ Pearson & Thorns, p.19.

²⁰ Pearson & Thorns, p.19.

²¹ Reid, p.28.

²² Reid, p.28.

²³ McCredie, p.11.

apparently of both researchers and contemporaries of the 1930s and 1940s, is that there “are no social classes” in New Zealand and “if there are, there shouldn’t be”.²⁴

The ideology may have served to dictate, or soften the focus of, local investigation into stratification. Nonetheless, researchers have increasingly pointed out that economic inequality and social classes were actual features of the contemporary society. Pearson and Thorns argue how “consistent patterns of inequality have stratified New Zealand” throughout the twentieth-century.²⁵ Congalton also notes how, despite the dominant contemporary view that New Zealand is classless or “a one-class society”, the “careful observer...will see many indications that class divisions and distinctions are a reality”.²⁶ His conclusion is based on a broad discussion of how the subject of class featured in election campaigns, official government inquiries, media references, and academic literature during the 1940s. The fact “that these references to social classes within our society appear regularly in various forms”, Congalton concludes, “signifies the actual or believed existence of social classes”.²⁷ That Congalton has used very similar sources to this study may explain his ambivalence over whether the existence of social classes was “actual or believed”. Such research serves as a reminder of the need to avoid drawing inferences in class imagery analysis regarding whether beliefs about class are also “a reality”.

There is a key to understanding the relationship between assumptions of egalitarianism and arguments about the existence of stratification in the historiography’s interpretation of 1930s and 1940s New Zealand. By distinguishing whether researchers are arguing about the existence of intrinsic equality or only equality of opportunity, the apparent contradictions in view are better understood. Using the interpretations of Australian researcher H.G. Oxley, Pearson and Thorns explain how an intrinsically equal society “demands the essential sameness of winners and losers”, accepts only “minor class distinctions and subtle patterns of status differentiation”, and firmly rejects any attribution of

²⁴ Congalton, p.22.

²⁵ Pearson & Thorns, pp.238-9.

²⁶ Congalton, pp.7-8.

²⁷ Congalton, p.10.

“superior” virtues to certain individuals or groups.²⁸ This view is reflected in researchers’ interpretations of New Zealand during the 1930s and 1940s as a homogenous or “highly uniform community”²⁹ with only “relatively small differences”.³⁰ Conversely, egalitarianism based on beliefs of equal opportunity and social mobility is only meaningful in a context of inequality. This egalitarian ideology is defined by Oxley as the insistence that “competitors in pursuit of scarce resources or rewards in society should start at the same point in the race”,³¹ and is therefore “compatible with any inequality not ascribed by birth; winners can have riches, and losers rags”.³² This may help to explain why more modern researchers, while still insisting on the prevalence of egalitarianism, represent the contemporary society as unequally stratified rather than intrinsically the “same”. The distinction is rarely made in the historiography, but it provides insight about the connections in researchers’ views of stratification and egalitarianism. As is soon revealed, the distinction is particularly crucial when trying to understand how contemporaries themselves view the connections between class and egalitarianism.

There is now consensus among researchers on how traditional explanations of New Zealand society during this period as “perfectly mobile”³³ and “amazingly classless”³⁴ are more idealised than based on actuality. More modern researchers tend to argue that New Zealand society during the 1930s and 1940s was neither completely class-free nor highly stratified. William Oliver maintains that “New Zealand has always been much nearer to the former than to the latter pole, but not so close that stratification into classes is precluded”.³⁵ Graeme Dunstall describes a “vague felt sense of class” in the “post-war world”,³⁶ while Congalton talks about

²⁸ H.G. Oxley, *Mateship in Local Organisation: a Study of Egalitarianism, Stratification, Leadership, and Amenities Projects in a Semi-Industrial Community in Inland NewSouth Wales*, St Lucia, 1974, p.53; Pearson & Thorns, p.239.

²⁹ Reid, p.28.

³⁰ Pearson & Thorns, p.19.

³¹ Pearson & Thorns, pp.239-40.

³² Oxley, p.45.

³³ W.H. Oliver, “Reeves, Sinclair, and the Social Pattern”, in P. Munz, ed., *The Feel of Truth: Essays in New Zealand and Pacific History*, Wellington, 1969, p.165.

³⁴ W.J. Cameron, *New Zealand*, New Jersey, 1965, p.152.

³⁵ Oliver, p.165.

³⁶ Notably, Dunstall is referring to “the forty years following 1940”, and hence his comments only generally relate to the 1940s and not to the 1930s. See: G. Dunstall, “The Social Pattern”, in W.H. Oliver & B.R. Williams, eds, *The Oxford History of New Zealand*, Auckland, 1981, p.399.

“the lack of clear demarkation [sic] between the social classes”.³⁷ The general argument is that in the 1930s and 1940s a degree of economic inequality and vague social distinctions existed in New Zealand. The significance of class is apparently unclear to contemporaries and researchers, if not also actually weak during the period.

Researchers are comparatively much clearer about the significance of class within the realm of contemporary politics. Mostly this assumption has to be gleaned from concise, ambiguous statements, such as: “[w]ithin the total political structure class has been the central division”.³⁸ The important point is that “class” is seen in the historiography as having an almost taken-for-granted presence in politics during the 1930s and 1940s. The assertion that two class-oriented political parties existed in this period is frequently made. The “rival sectional interests” of “property” and “labour”, according to Len Richardson, each produced a political party.³⁹ Similarly, Pearson and Thorns argue that New Zealand “had a class-based two-party system”, but observe how neither the National nor the Labour “party claimed sole allegiance to one class”.⁴⁰ Olssen argues that “Labour was a class party”, and before 1935 “the working class alone supported Labour and since then has provided the party with its largest and most reliable basis of support”.⁴¹ Dunstall more generally concludes that from the late 1940s, while “National and Labour politicians alike denied the existence of class war...politicians knew where to find their voters, and New Zealand politics remained class-based”.⁴²

Peter Gibbons provides a relatively detailed account of class and politics in the context of the 1930s depression. Class-based conflict and class awareness resulted, in his view, from the government’s sentencing of a good proportion of “rural and urban lower classes” to “misery” in the work-camps. These classes, in Gibbons’ opinion, “learnt to hate the ‘governing classes’ ”.⁴³ Robert Chapman also observes

³⁷ Congalton, p.97.

³⁸ Olssen, “The ‘Working Class’ ”, pp.59-60.

³⁹ L. Richardson, “Parties and Political Change”, in G.W. Rice, ed., *The Oxford History of New Zealand*, Auckland, 1992, p.202.

⁴⁰ Pearson & Thorns, p.141.

⁴¹ Olssen, “The ‘Working Class’ ”, p.46.

⁴² Dunstall, p.399.

⁴³ P.J. Gibbons, “The Climate of Opinion”, in W.H. Oliver & B.R. Williams, eds, *The Oxford History of New Zealand*, Auckland, 1981, pp.321-2.

the “divisions exacerbated by the depression”, but argues that these were counteracted by the Labour government’s state housing aim of “a levelling upwards”.⁴⁴

Class, or classlessness, consistently features in discussions of the contemporary Labour government and its “levelling” social welfare policies. Olssen argues how the “Labour government elected in 1935 removed many inequalities”, and that the “working class, the Catholics, and indeed the Maori began to receive a fairer deal”.⁴⁵ Clyde Griffen talks about the 1930s “as a time when government advanced social levelling in a more decisive way”.⁴⁶ The Labour government, in his opinion, “helped to bring part of the urban working-class into the middle-class through government policies that reduced burdens and insecurities and expanded opportunities”.⁴⁷ Researchers emphasise the government’s “levelling” of social and economic inequality from the mid 1930s. In the area of state housing, Griffen maintains that “many different occupations” were represented in the emergent suburbs. Consequently, he claims, “perceptions of social rank became more ambiguous and there seems a strong possibility that class awareness diminished”.⁴⁸ In discussions of politics, the connections between researchers’ assumptions about contemporary actualities of class and the apparent “perceptions” and “awareness” of class are again demonstrated. In the historiography, despite differing and mostly broad interpretations, there is evidently a shared assumption that social classes and inequality were somehow a real presence in, and shaper of, contemporary politics.

There is also some unanimity in discussions of the relationship between issues of gender and race and class in this period. Notably, this issue has received scant attention in the historiography. The dearth of research may be because gender and racial inequality does not sit well with the traditionally favoured interpretation of an egalitarian society. Pearson and Thorns note that throughout the twentieth-century “Maori remained essentially a subordinate rural based minority...a

⁴⁴ R. Chapman, “From Labour to National”, in W.H. Oliver & B.R. Williams, eds, *The Oxford History of New Zealand*, Auckland, 1981, p.342.

⁴⁵ E. Olssen, “Towards a New Society”, in G.W. Rice, ed., *The Oxford History of New Zealand*, Auckland, 1992, pp.283-4.

⁴⁶ C. Griffen, “Towards an Urban Social History for New Zealand”, *NZJH*, 20, 2, (1986), pp.121-2.

⁴⁷ Griffen, p.121.

⁴⁸ Griffen, p.121.

peripheral grouping in spatial and economic terms” to a “European dominated society”.⁴⁹ The interpretation is similar to Reid’s discussion of the “disadvantaged position of women”⁵⁰ during the depression. As he claims, “because women did not seem to constitute a distinct economic class, defining the nature of their oppression was hardly possible at that time”. Reid asserts that this should “be seen more clearly in terms of a different spatial metaphor: not of vertically layered strata, but of centre and periphery”.⁵¹ Class or stratification is literally taken out of the discussion. The “central zone” of New Zealand society around this time, according to Reid, was a “male domain...from which women were kept remote”.⁵² These examples are notable for even referring to gender and racial inequality and the possible relation of this inequality to class. Nonetheless, the vagueness of their interpretations of social and economic inequality in an apparently classless society is unexceptional. Just as class tends to be dismissed from interpretations of 1930s and 1940s New Zealand, so also are issues of gender and race treated as peripheral.

In looking at the assumptions about stratification in the secondary sources as a whole, a pattern begins to emerge. This was a period in which New Zealand society was apparently largely egalitarian in both contemporary belief and actuality, but with some degree of economic inequality and social stratification. Another major shared assumption about class in this period is the basic classification of the social structure in terms of three main classes. This somewhat contradicts, but is noticeably also connected with, assumptions of egalitarianism and social mobility. According to Congalton’s research of the 1940s, the “most frequent classification” of New Zealand’s social structure during the period “was expressed in terms of three main classes, Upper Class, Middle Class, and Lower Class”, with the potential for subdivision or subgroups.⁵³ Although Congalton’s findings are mainly based on impressionistic and anecdotal evidence, the adoption and assumption of this classification is frequently made in the modern historiography. A three-class social structure was apparently an actual, recognisable feature of the contemporary society.

⁴⁹ Pearson & Thorns, p.203.

⁵⁰ Reid, p.116.

⁵¹ Reid, pp.116-17.

⁵² Reid, p.117.

⁵³ Congalton, p.95.

In particular, researchers place much emphasis on the existence of the “lower-class” or “working-class” during the 1930s and 1940s. Olssen states that the “egalitarian culture that emerged in New Zealand rendered militance among the “working-class” less necessary, and adds that to “be a worker here was not to be inferior”.⁵⁴ Chris Wilkes also attributes some importance or status to the working-class in this period, in his argument that “the emerging organisational power of the working class dispelled the illusion that class could be ignored”.⁵⁵ Galt talks, although in less explicit class language than Olssen and Wilkes, about the existence in the 1930s of low “social groupings, which were dominated by those with low paid unskilled work” such as labourers or miners.⁵⁶ Stevan Eldred-Grigg provides more description of the working-class in his research of “working people” and “class language” in the late nineteenth and early twentieth-century. There was no one adjective for the “working class”, he explains, but a multiplicity of terms such as “labouring class” or “the common people” to describe “wage workers and their culture”.⁵⁷ In his opinion, the phrase “working people” was most widespread and had “more old fashioned, more gentle” connotations than the term “working class”.⁵⁸ The existence of the “working-class” in the 1930s and 1940s is a claim supported by the use of both “objective” data on lifestyles and occupations, and also the “subjective” data of how the “working-class” were recognised and talked about by contemporaries. A shared assumption in the historiography is that in the contemporary egalitarian environment, while the economic status of the “working-class” was low, the social status of a “worker” was ostensibly not inferior.

A number of researchers also describe the existence of the “gentry” or “upper-class” in New Zealand during this period. According to James Belich, there are signs that a “substantial overt gentility” or “gentry”, characterised by refined manners, elite education, servants, and often old money, survived at least until

⁵⁴ Olssen, “The ‘Working Class’”, p.53.

⁵⁵ C. Wilkes, “Class”, in P. Spoonley, D.G. Pearson, & I. Shirley, eds, *New Zealand Society: a Sociological Introduction*, Palmerston North, 1990, p.80.

⁵⁶ Galt, pp.71, 155-6.

⁵⁷ S. Eldred-Grigg, *New Zealand Working People, 1890-1990*, Palmerston North, 1990, p.102.

⁵⁸ Eldred-Grigg, p.102.

World War II.⁵⁹ Similarly, Galt describes the existence during the 1930s of “high status social groupings”, whose members were typically employed in “skilled, highly paid and socially prestigious occupations” such as sheep farming. Galt discusses the kinds of contemporaries who were at the top of the “wealth hierarchy”, and finds that those “born to people with skilled, highly paid and socially prestigious occupations had a final level of wealth nearly double those born to the unskilled, lowly paid and low social status jobs”.⁶⁰ This finding appears to somewhat contradict her thesis that the contemporary society was characterised by a “high level of wealth with an egalitarian distribution”.⁶¹ Galt seems to struggle with reconciling her explanation of the inherent inequality of wealth between those born into the upper and working strata with notions of egalitarianism. In effect, Galt is arguing that the outcomes and opportunities for gaining wealth in New Zealand during the period were intrinsically rather unequal.

Perhaps this is why Galt places much emphasis on social mobility and the achieved, rather than merely ascribed, status of the “privileged class”.⁶² The wealthy might have come “from a well-to-do background” and “had superior education”, she maintains, but they “had to achieve being wealthy through their own efforts”. They “did not show signs of being a closed elite”, she argues, and there “was a considerable amount of upwards mobility in the group”.⁶³ Moreover, according to Galt, there were only a small number of very wealthy New Zealanders during the period, and most of the wealthy “probably lived comfortably, but not pretentious lives, and did not by conspicuous consumption draw attention to their good fortune”.⁶⁴ Elvin Hatch also observes how from the late 1940s onwards, “strong egalitarian pressures...led to the abandonment of many of the overt symbols by which people of refinement distanced themselves from those below”.⁶⁵ According to Bob Consedine, that the “rich have managed to disguise their wealth and continue to identify with the struggle of the ordinary working person” has been

⁵⁹ J. Belich, *Paradise Reforged: a History of the New Zealanders From the 1880s to the Year 2000*, Auckland, 2001, pp.132-3.

⁶⁰ Galt, p.173.

⁶¹ Galt, abstract.

⁶² Galt, p.207.

⁶³ Galt, abstract.

⁶⁴ Galt, p.180.

⁶⁵ E. Hatch, *Respectable Lives: Social Standing in Rural New Zealand*, Berkeley, 1992, p.164.

a “significant factor in maintaining the egalitarian myth”.⁶⁶ In looking at New Zealand history in general, Consedine asserts that “wealthy people...simply did not admit that they were wealthy, and poor people don’t easily admit to being poor”.⁶⁷ The suggestion by these researchers is that contemporaries may have disguised or euphemised the significance of social distinctions and disparities of wealth during the 1930s and 1940s. In other words, there may be a gap between the contemporary rhetoric and reality of class: or a difference between what contemporaries were actually seeing and what they were choosing to say about egalitarianism. This suggestion serves to challenge the dominant interpretation in the historiography of the largely egalitarian and classless nature of the contemporary society. Given that many researchers have used impressionistic and anecdotal evidence in forming arguments about the lack of economic and social inequality, the contemporary rhetoric may well have contributed to the interpretation in the first place.

As well as the working and upper strata, the existence in the 1930s and 1940s of a “middle-class” is another popular, and perhaps less contentious, topic of discussion in the historiography. Pearson and Thorns place particular emphasis on a middle-class in their interpretation of the “class structure” of New Zealand’s workforce during the 1930s. They see the workforce as made up of an “Old Middle Class” of professional, business, and farming occupations, a “New Middle Class” of professional, sales, and white-collar occupations, and a “working class” of skilled and unskilled occupations.⁶⁸ As Wilkes *et al* comment, while Pearson and Thorns “give no clear picture of the class structural map, the middle classes appear to play an important role in the development of New Zealand’s social system, rather than the working class”.⁶⁹ Galt describes the existence in the 1930s of a group of “middle wealth holders”, whose members “would undoubtedly have been able to afford a comfortable house in a good part of town”.⁷⁰ This “comfortably-off group”, Galt adds, were “most likely to be involved with farming, the professions

⁶⁶ B. Consedine, “Inequality and the Egalitarian Myth”, in D. Novitz & W.E. Willmott, eds, *Culture and Identity in New Zealand*, Wellington, 1989, p.175.

⁶⁷ Consedine, p.175.

⁶⁸ Pearson & Thorns, p.46.

⁶⁹ Wilkes *et al*, p.8.

⁷⁰ Galt, p.166.

or the skilled trades”, and had a higher social status than “the poor group”.⁷¹ Belich also concentrates on the middle-class in his analysis of the twentieth-century, perhaps because he sees the “gentry” as becoming “less important” from the 1940s onwards.⁷² He very specifically subdivides the middle-class into an “upper middle” of “professional, managers and industrialists”, a “*petite bourgeoisie* of small-medium urban proprietors”, a “farming ‘class’ of small-medium rural proprietors”, and a “lower middle class of white-collar workers”.⁷³ The strong focus on the middle-class may signify the reaching of a middle-ground between interpretations of the 1930s and 1940s society as “class-free” or “class-filled”. In some ways, the focus serves to further reduce the disparity between the “high floor and low ceiling”,⁷⁴ or the low-profile upper and non-inferior working-classes, which apparently constituted the contemporary social structure.

While the classification of a three-class society is an assumption that is often made in the historiography, clear distinctions and conflicts between these three classes tend to be only weakly asserted. Eldred-Grigg’s counter-claim that the contemporary society “was often seen as divided into three thirds, each roughly equal in population, but enormously unequal in wealth and power”,⁷⁵ is unpopular. Galt concedes that because “they controlled such a high proportion of the resources”, the “very wealthy often had the ability to dominate the social, political and economic life of the nation to an extent that was out of proportion to their numbers”. Yet her conclusion is that “social divisions were less strong as these people had become wealthy during their lives, and others who began where they began presumably felt some affinity with them”.⁷⁶ The emphasis on affinity, a lack of hostility, and weak demarcation between classes is favoured in the historiography. Keith Jackson and John Harre talk about “the softening of the boundaries” and the “loosely graded society” of New Zealand.⁷⁷ As Oliver

⁷¹ Galt, pp.167-9.

⁷² Belich, pp.132-3.

⁷³ Belich, p.126.

⁷⁴ Oliver, p.164.

⁷⁵ Eldred-Grigg, p.103.

⁷⁶ Galt, p.200.

⁷⁷ K. Jackson & J. Harre, *New Zealand*, London, 1969, p.115.

concludes, “[w]e cannot turn up very much in the way of a feudal aristocracy, an entrepreneurial middle class, or an industrial proletariat”.⁷⁸

New Zealand’s classlessness and lack of conflict and social distinctions is often stressed in the context of international class structures. Galt maintains that “New Zealand was an egalitarian country by international standards”, and that the very rich’s “assets did not tower above the average person’s assets to the extent found in the United States, Britain or even Australia”.⁷⁹ Olssen’s specific description of the “new, affluent, urban middle class” during the period 1890-1940 is another example of the use of overseas class contrasts. He points out how this class was “a stratum without a name, for the phrase ‘white collar’ was rarely used”, and that it is not clear “that the defining characteristics of this stratum in other societies – disdain for manual work and hostility to unions – were central here”.⁸⁰

Flexibility and complexity in these comparatively weak or unclear class distinctions have been increasingly stressed. In 2001, Belich described New Zealand’s class structure in the twentieth-century in terms of adaptive class “cultures” and “communities”, stressing “class-cultural mobility” and class subdivision.⁸¹ Notably, though, how exactly Belich interprets stratification in relation to the 1930s and 1940s is difficult to assess from his very broad focus. This recent, complex, and typically unspecified interpretation of class in relation to the 1930s and 1940s is a fitting example with which to end the literature review.

Ultimately, this chapter has served to reveal how the historiography fails to provide much detailed or clear insight on the “actualities” of class in 1930s and 1940s New Zealand. The emphases on homogeneity and classlessness, which were strong features of traditional interpretations of this society, have increasingly waned. Instead, researchers tend to acknowledge the contemporary existence and awareness of class, all the while emphasising the ambiguity, fluidity, and complexity of contemporary social distinctions and classes. The interpretation of

⁷⁸ Oliver, pp.163-4.

⁷⁹ Galt, pp.206-7.

⁸⁰ Olssen, “Towards a New Society”, p.273.

⁸¹ Belich, p.126.

class and economic inequality has been somewhat cautiously asserted against a tradition of emphatic egalitarian interpretations.

There are some definite if not definitive assumptions about the period in the historiography, which will later be compared to the findings of this study. First, egalitarianism and classlessness is at least a popular contemporary ideal, if not also a pervasive actuality. Implicitly, according to the historiography, the predominant member or focus of this “egalitarian” society is the European male. Second, an emerging working-class consciousness, a class-based two-party system, and a desire for social “levelling” are features of the contemporary political scene. Third, the social structure consists of three main classes: working, upper, and middle, with degrees of mobility or variability in the distinctions and boundaries between these classes. Apparently, for researchers and members of the contemporary society, strong hierarchical and ascribed social distinctions, disparities of wealth, and conflict between the three main classes are irrelevant, or at least unpopular, topics for discussion.

While recent research is remedying the paucity of knowledge about class in New Zealand’s history, the void remains in relation to the 1930s and 1940s. A number of researchers have at least referred to, and a few have examined, the issue of class in relation to this specific historical context. The tendency to combine both “objective” and “subjective” data in forming conclusions, and the failure to clearly distinguish between contemporary perceptions and the realities or material experiences of class, is a feature of previous research. This exacerbates the ambiguity of the historiography’s portrayal of the extent to which New Zealand society during the period was actually stratified and/or egalitarian. Of course, the use of impressionistic and anecdotal evidence suggests that the historiography’s account of the significance of class should bear similarities to contemporaries’ accounts. As discussed in the conclusion to this study, discovering the extent to which the accounts both converge and diverge is an intriguing process.

Chapter 3

Academic and Polemical “Class” Imagery

Introduction

The sources examined in this chapter nicely illustrate many of the problems and themes discussed in the opening two chapters. The focus is on works published during the 1930s and 1940s by New Zealand “academics (social scientists in particular), politicians and writers of polemical treatises”.¹ Some general themes or common assumptions about contemporary meanings of class and languages of social distinction are deduced in examining these sources. This lays the foundations for the other four sets of images to qualify and challenge. Three overarching themes, which are constantly and variously illustrated throughout the selected academic and polemical sources, are discussed.

The first theme relates to the endurance of traditional notions of New Zealand’s distinctiveness as an egalitarian, homogenous, and largely classless society. The attribution of these characteristics to the contemporary society is an overwhelming tendency in the academic and polemical sources examined. It is at least partly derived from early European settler ideologies of New Zealand as the ideal egalitarian society. The focus on British snobbery and class rigidity is constantly used to highlight what New Zealand society is not. Measured against external or Old World class evils, the existence and significance of internal inequality and disparities of wealth are effectively overshadowed and lessened.

This common portrayal of society is complicated and contradicted by other “class images”. Many of the complications arise from the legacy of a rhetorical tradition of class. In a number of these contemporary sources, awareness or at least unconscious utilisation of European class theories and concepts is demonstrated. Yet there are

¹ A. Marwick, *Class: Image and Reality in Britain, France and the USA Since 1930*, Houndmills, 1990, p.13.

evidently also a number of complexities and ambiguities involved in attempting to apply these inherited or imported ideas about class within the local context. Some contemporaries find the rhetoric incompatible with what they perceive to be real, or ideal, in New Zealand. There is also much diversity in the application of these inherited tools and categories of analysis. The belief that New Zealand society was dichotomously divided between two main classes, which is arguably influenced by Marxist class theory, is popular among both academics and polemicists. Yet the recognition of “sub-classes” within the two classes of “capital and labour”, and the ambivalence over the significance of the “middle-class”, illustrate the variations in dichotomous interpretations.

The related and final complication is the recognition that while classlessness might be a predominant ideal, it is not necessarily a pervasive reality. A number of these contemporaries mount formidable egalitarian critiques, particularly in relation to politics, the education system, and to the inequality between “elite” and “working” classes. The belief in New Zealand as a largely classless, egalitarian society clearly has widespread appeal for these academics and polemicists. Even so, observations of actual economic inequality and social distinction undermine the evidence supporting the belief. On one hand, these contemporaries are “insiders” in that they are experiencing and living within New Zealand in the 1930s and 1940s. On the other hand, they are also outside observers, who are attempting or are expected to make objective interpretations. The influence of overseas theory and inherited ideologies of class impinges on their ability to be either purely objective or subjective. Indeed, contemporaries appear to have experienced their own problems of hermeneutics and methodology.

Sources

The source selection provides as comprehensive and representative coverage as scope permits.² Some aspects of this selection need outlining. All sources had to be published during, and refer to at least one aspect of New Zealand society in, the period

² See this chapter’s bibliography for a list of all the academic and polemical works consulted.

1930 to 1949. Works on non-local or pre-1930 subject matter have therefore been excluded, which helps to sharpen the focus on the contemporary “present”. Given the problem of overlap with later chapters and limitations on scope, literary and polemical sources like *Tomorrow* were also excluded.

Broadly speaking, “academic imagery” is represented by the 1939-1941 centennial publications and similar works published by the Department of Internal Affairs. These books provide a range of images on “women, education, science, literature and fine arts, pioneering, government, farming, external affairs, [and] social life”.³ Notably, any possibly contentious subjects such as communism, and criticism of the government and social welfare legislation, were actively discouraged.⁴ The official line between “academic” and “polemical” was enforced. This is especially evident in the rejection of William Sutch’s work on social services, which was originally intended as a centennial survey. Academics like Eric McCormick and politicians like Peter Fraser rejected Sutch’s work for having apparently contentious content.⁵ A “left-wing” or polemical publishing company later published Sutch’s work.⁶ While the ideology behind this “government-sponsored exercise”⁷ is critically explored in chapter four, the centennial surveys cannot be ignored. As Rachel Barrowman admits, despite their limitations as “social and political critiques”, the surveys “had been, in scale, the most significant publishing venture to date in the area of investigation of New Zealand society and culture”.⁸ To balance the officially academic nature of these sources, a range of polemical sources published by the Progressive Publishing Society and Co-Operative Book Societies has been included in this study. Barrowman describes these publishers as “left-wing companies”, which aimed to “establish a socialist or popular culture”.⁹

³ P.J. Gibbons, “The Climate of Opinion”, in W.H. Oliver & B.R. Williams, eds, *The Oxford History of New Zealand*, Auckland, 1981, p.328.

⁴ R. Barrowman, *A Popular Vision: the Arts and the Left in New Zealand, 1930-1950*, Wellington, 1991, p.158.

⁵ M. Bassett & M. King, *Tomorrow Comes the Song: a Life of Peter Fraser*, Auckland, 2000, p.206; Gibbons, p.328; Barrowman, p.158.

⁶ Barrowman, p.139.

⁷ Barrowman, p.158.

⁸ Barrowman, p.158.

⁹ Barrowman, pp.6, 230.

More specifically, the selection of polemical writers was governed by the aim to include a wide range of both prominent and less well-known political, economic, and social commentators and works. Given the amount and range published in this period, the selection of academic works was necessarily more confined. It was governed by three basic criteria, of which each author was required to meet a minimum of two. Each writer had to have a university degree, a scholarly approach to writing, and/or hold an academic or educational post.¹⁰ Yet because writers like Willis Airey could be placed in both categories,¹¹ there is a problem in making even these broad distinctions. For the purposes of this study, as Arthur Marwick reasons, the problem is overcome by collectively examining the perceptions of the various academics and polemicists. This also demonstrates “that no privileged position is being given to professional works of social science”, and that these are “primary sources like any other, to be valued as much for their unwitting, as for their witting testimony”.¹² Unless insight is provided by the broad distinction between “academic” and “polemical”, the sources have not been further demarcated.

Accusations might be made about how the education and social position of these commentators have influenced their outlook on class; that these contemporary “images” are unrepresentative of the majority. Many of these “images” might be views from an “educated elite”, although this is difficult to tell given the lack of clear biographical detail. Some are also the views of self-described trade unionists and labourers.¹³ But the issue is not so much the objective classification of the authors. The issue is the degree to which social background diminishes the representative value

¹⁰ The selection was aided by referring to: G.C. Peterson, *Who's Who in New Zealand*, Eighth Edition, Wellington, 1964; G.H. Scholefield, *Who's Who in New Zealand and the Western Pacific*, Fifth Edition, Wellington, 1951; Department of Internal Affairs, *The Dictionary of New Zealand Biography: Volume Four: 1921-1940* (DIA), Auckland, 1998; and biographical descriptions in the authors' works. A brief note of the authors' “credentials” is included in this chapter's bibliography.

¹¹ Airey had an MA degree, was the Associate Professor of History at Auckland University in 1949, and yet had work published by the Progressive Book Society. See, for example: W.T.G. Airey, *A Step in the March Towards a People's World*, Wellington 1945; W.T.G. Airey, *The Road to Victory: the People's Unity Against Fascism*, Wellington, 1942.

¹² Marwick, p.13.

¹³ A. Galbraith and S. Scott are two examples.

of their views. The wide diversity and disparity of views found in these sources arguably goes a considerable way to making the issue less pertinent. Certainly, these are not all the contemporary meanings and languages of class. Hence the need for these academic and polemical images to be compared to, and combined with, different available sources and other types of social commentators.

Rather than simply dismissing these particular sources as unrepresentative, the value of what they do signify should be considered. An educated academic, it could be argued, cannot understand the significance of class for anyone but themselves and people of a similar background. This is similar to arguing that a present-day researcher cannot grasp the significance of class for those in the past. Surely in some ways they can, and must. Academics and polemicists, as Marwick states, “do not invent their images: within the constraints of their intellectual or political persuasion, they attempt to present a distillation of what is really happening”.¹⁴ Some of these “understandings of understandings”¹⁵ had to have been seen as accurate or accepted. Otherwise, the texts would not have been published, or their authors employed as didactic or critical representatives of 1930s and 1940s society. In the 1940s, as Erik Olssen observes, “there was a large audience” for the works of New Zealand critics and historians who wished to “grasp and communicate” their “strong sense of place”.¹⁶ In the *Dictionary of New Zealand Biography* a similar observation is made about how the centennial publications were “written for a popular audience”.¹⁷ In particular, Olssen notes how the publisher A.H. Reed “picked the popular mood best”, and that the books his company published about New Zealand, such as Reed’s own *Story of New Zealand*, “proved enormously popular”.¹⁸ If only by implication, the perspectives of a wider audience are likely to have been at least considered by these contemporary academics and polemicists.

¹⁴ Marwick, p.73.

¹⁵ C. Lloyd, *Explanation in Social History*, Oxford, 1986, p.263.

¹⁶ E. Olssen, “Depression and War (1939-41)”, in K. Sinclair, ed., *The Oxford Illustrated History of New Zealand*, Auckland, 1996, p.230.

¹⁷ DIA, p.231.

¹⁸ Olssen, “Depression and War”, p.230.

Egalitarian Rhetoric and Overseas Yardsticks

Peter Gibbons argues that in the 1930s and 1940s the “kind of New Zealand that most people wanted to read about was...male-dominated, and not greatly concerned about class, privilege or poverty”.¹⁹ Many of the academic and polemical writers grant this wish. Indeed, many seem to be greatly concerned with illustrating how New Zealand was in fact characterised by classlessness, lack of privilege, and equality.

F.W.L. Wood and Leslie Lipson are among the most ardent subscribers to this interpretation. Both contemporaries partly recognise the influence of the early European settlers’ reactions against the perceived rigidity and inequality of the British class structure, which have been described in much detail by historians such as Miles Fairburn and David Hamer.²⁰ As Hamer explains, the promise to the early settlers was that New Zealand was a “New World”, ideally free of inherited privilege and “those rigid class divisions which in the Old World prevented men from improving their condition”.²¹ Wood and Lipson evidently see New Zealand, both in the past and contemporary present, as a kind of ideal egalitarian society. As the “conditions” in the days of early European settlement “were not there for a small wealthy aristocracy, [or] for a downtrodden and embittered proletariat”, Wood reasons, an “egalitarian” democracy, which was resentful of “class privilege”, “just grew up”.²² Lipson makes a similar observation that the “egalitarianism” which is a “feature of the Dominion’s life”, “is largely understandable by the colonists’ reaction in a new, young country to the privileges and inequalities of the social system they had known in Britain”.²³ According to Lipson, these “well and truly laid foundations” have contributed to the levying “nowadays” of “successful polemics upon caste, class, and capital”.²⁴ John Condcliffe also stresses how snobbery or “social mannerisms” are not “characteristic” of the “New Zealand outlook”, and that “any attempt to reproduce sectional British

¹⁹ Gibbons, p.328.

²⁰ See: M. Fairburn, *The Ideal Society and its Enemies: the Foundations of Modern New Zealand Society, 1850-1900*, Auckland, 1989; D. Hamer, *The New Zealand Liberals: the Years of Power, 1891-1912*, Auckland, 1988, p.52.

²¹ Hamer, p.52.

²² F.L.W. Wood, *This New Zealand*, Hamilton, 1946, pp.65, 74, 126.

²³ L. Lipson, *The Politics of Equality: New Zealand’s Adventures in Democracy*, Chicago, 1948, p.8.

²⁴ Lipson, p.488.

customs in the very different atmosphere of the Dominion is doomed to failure".²⁵ The success and distinctiveness of the contemporary egalitarian society is sealed by its historical and geographical detachment from British society.

Contextual and comparative references to overseas social structures also seem to soften the blow of admitting any local elements of economic inequality and social distinction. In other words, while New Zealand society may not be perceived as completely classless or equal by these contemporaries, when seen in an international light it is at least portrayed as very classless. Lipson admits that "New Zealand does, of course, contain its poor and its rich, its slums and its mansions", but argues that "the gap that separates them is considerably narrower than in the big democracies".²⁶ Constance McAdam also agrees that in New Zealand, "while there is a good deal of poverty, there is not the mass of abject poverty that there is in England, and consequently the contrast between rich and poor is much less violent and obtrusive". Wealth, enjoyment, and culture are more evenly spread, in McAdam's view, due to these lesser disparities and the fact that "New Zealand does not possess, like England, that leisured class which makes enjoyment its main aim". "Comparatively",²⁷ to quote McAdam, is a key term and focus in discussions of class and social distinction in New Zealand.

New Zealand's lack of snobbery and social distinctions, comparatively speaking, is a recurring assumption in these academic and polemical texts. The assumption is usually made in the context of strong reaction against the apparent British vices of class rigidity and snobbery. If these contemporaries ever concede the existence of "snobbery" in New Zealand, the admission tends to be accompanied by an emphasis on social mobility. A degree of snobbery might persist, McAdam argues, but "classes are not set so rigidly as they are in England, and men and women pass freely from one to another". Indeed, according to McAdam, the "absence of sharp class distinctions

²⁵ J.B. Condliffe, *New Zealand in the Making: a Survey of Economic and Social Development*, London, 1930, p.460.

²⁶ Lipson, p.6.

²⁷ C.C. McAdam, *New Zealand: Country and People*, Auckland, 1937, pp.41, 46.

and the greater feeling of fraternity” will be the “social difference that will strike the observant English visitor most forcibly”.²⁸ “Our social life”, Angus Harrop observes, “has often been described as a pale imitation of life in Britain, with much the same snobbery that prevails there in some circles”. While he concedes that “[w]e have people who come from the upper ranks of society in Britain”, Harrop argues that “they are in a small minority which tends to become smaller as New Zealand progresses towards the goal of democratic equality”.²⁹ According to this type of contemporary interpretation, elements of an Old World class structure may have survived in the New World, but they were fast becoming extinct.

According to a number of the academics and polemicists, New Zealand’s egalitarian progress was particularly manifest in the area of education. Notably, the focus is on equality of opportunity, rather than on whether the outcomes of the education system were also equal. Harrop claims that within New Zealand’s education system there is little of the English class “snobbery”, and that “[w]e all start from the same mark”.³⁰ Horace Belshaw also maintains that “the schools available to the children of wage earners are as good as those attended by the children of professional or business men”.³¹ As Arnold Campbell asserts, because “New Zealand has insisted on a basic minimum standard for everyone”, and “the range of social and economic differences” is narrow, its education system closely approximates “equality of educational opportunity”.³²

Harrop even worried that because, in general, “[o]ur social distinctions are not very marked...an obvious danger of an overriding and deadening uniformity of outlook exists”.³³ Condliffe also expresses his fear that “New Zealand has almost no counterpoise to the levelling influences of majority rule”.³⁴ The contemporary society is apparently so classless and egalitarian, at least in terms of social consciousness, that

²⁸ McAdam, p.41.

²⁹ A.J. Harrop, *My New Zealand*, London, 1939, p.254.

³⁰ Harrop, p.273.

³¹ H. Belshaw, “Economic Organisation”, in H. Belshaw, ed., *New Zealand*, Berkeley, 1947, p.109.

³² A.E. Campbell, “Education”, in H. Belshaw, ed., *New Zealand*, Berkeley, 1947, p.220.

³³ Harrop, p.254.

³⁴ Condliffe, *New Zealand in the Making*, p.460.

it is in danger of being almost too “levelled”. In the late 1940s Lipson dismally concluded that the danger had been realised. In his view, “like-mindedness, similarity of attitudes, [and] cultural homogeneity...are characteristic of community life in New Zealand”. Lipson worried how the “equalitarianism that may succeed in raising averages is also guilty of reducing standards”. As the “defects of a perverted equalitarianism” are portrayed, the shining picture of New Zealand’s classlessness is dulled. According to Lipson, in “their thinking, as in their methods of living, New Zealanders tend to conform to type. The same convictions, prejudices, and stock symbols predominate throughout the country. There is not enough internal diversity to produce a clash of opinion”.³⁵

If Lipson had closely examined the “clash of opinion” and “internal diversity” in views about class among these few academic and polemical writers, he might not have been so worried. The dominant interpretation of New Zealand’s egalitarianism in these sources is in fact complicated and contradicted by a number of disparate interpretations of the same society.

Rhetorical Traditions and Internal Diversity

Many of the complications arise from the different uses and meanings of the term “class”. One of the most consistent findings about these sources is the marked failure of academics and polemicists to delineate the term. This may indicate that its meaning is simply assumed to be too obvious or unimportant to require clarifying. Alternatively, these contemporaries may consider class too litigious or problematic a subject on which to dwell. At least in discussions of egalitarianism, class tends to be treated as the distant “other”; a term with unwanted connotations for those wishing to emphasise New Zealand’s classlessness. Interestingly, the possibly unwanted connotations tend to have been the very focus of those who have paused to discuss the meaning of class. The existence of class within New Zealand, in terms of significant social and economic distinctions and disparities of wealth, power, and status, is usually also critically observed by the academics and polemicists who attempt to

³⁵ Lipson, pp.4, 491-2.

define the term. The internal focus serves to locate much more inequality in New Zealand than the external comparisons.

One of the most comprehensive discussions of class is found in Gilbert Cope's polemical treatise on *Christians in the Class Struggle*. Cope sees class as a "technical term of *economics*...concerned primarily with the means by which the wealth of any community is produced, and only secondarily with the corresponding system of social relationships".³⁶ He classifies the social structure in terms of two main "strata". The "complex division of labour within modern society produces a series of social groups which are often called classes", Cope maintains, but "which, in fact, are subsidiary strata of the main class-division of capitalist and proletariat". Despite his insistence on the dominance of this "main class-division", Cope notes how a range of classifications is made by contemporary New Zealanders. He concedes that "there is no sharp line of division between the 'owners' and the 'workers'", but "innumerable intermediate groupings between the majority group of property-less workers and the minority which exercises general control".³⁷

Cope's ideas about class are fairly similar to the definitions articulated in William Doig's *Rich and Poor in New Zealand* and a 1948 Fabian Society publication on stabilization. Both these texts place much emphasis on economic criteria like income and occupation. The discussions tend to be focused on "objectively" describing class, rather than talking about the subjective elements of class such as class consciousness or social relationships. Both make an initial argument about how New Zealand's social structure is comprised of four main "classes". The Fabians distinguish four classes: "Farmers, Manufacturers, Traders and Shopkeepers", and "Wage and Salary Earners".³⁸ Doig and the Fabians see classes, as Cope also argued, as "clearly definable sections of the community having a distinctive relationship to the process of

³⁶ G. Cope, *Christians in the Class Struggle*, Wellington, 1944, p.8.

³⁷ Cope, pp.12-13.

³⁸ New Zealand Fabian Society (NZFS), *Stabilization or Socialization? A Controversy Between a Study Group and Ormond Wilson and A.M. Finlay*, Wellington, 1948, p.3.

production”.³⁹ Doig’s four classes are defined as a “poverty line class”, a “working class”, a “middle class”, and an “upper class”. These “economic classes” are also partly defined “in terms of standards of life”. The class distinctions are based on the different levels of “purchasing power” each class possesses to acquire necessities and luxuries. Those in the “upper class”, for instance, are seen as being able to spend a “comparatively large proportion of total expenditure” on “social entertainment...holidays and so on”.⁴⁰

Yet the interesting commonality in these, and other, discussions of the social structure is the assumption that despite a range of possible classifications or “sub-classes”, two main classes tend to dominate. While there are various terms for these classes, such as “rich and poor”, “capitalist and proletariat”, or “ruler and worker”, the relationship between them is nearly always talked about in dichotomous terms. A common assumption is that the ruling minority has a disproportionate amount of wealth compared to the majority. Often the relationship is described in terms of “us versus them”, the idea being that “them”, the minority, profit at the expense of “us”, the working majority. Despite Doig’s classification of four different classes, for instance, he asserts that New Zealand society is essentially divided into “the rich and the poor”. Most “of us are poor”, Doig argues, but “the few rich own an enormous proportion of the country’s wealth”.⁴¹ Doig also concludes, somewhat echoing Cope’s assumption, that the working-class is the majority, constituting seventy-seven percent of the population.⁴² At least in these sources, the lines between subjective and objective class criteria; between talking about class in relation to the “means of production” and also in terms of class consciousness, are blurred. The Fabians suggest that “there are many more than four classes” and point to “a number of sub-classes”, but conclude that despite “internal conflicts inside main social classes, subclasses tend to merge in presenting an overall class viewpoint”. The “landowners, manufacturers and commercialists” are seen as “propertied classes”, who “can generally compose their

³⁹ NZFS, p.6.

⁴⁰ W.T. Doig, *Rich and Poor in New Zealand*, Christchurch, 1942, p.4.

⁴¹ Doig, pp.12-13.

⁴² Doig, p.5.

differences sufficiently to make common cause” against workers. The discussion of class is once more mainly focused on two characteristic groups: on the “class struggle” between the poor majority of “workers” and a powerful minority of “capitalists”.⁴³

The above discussions also demonstrate the influence of inherited class theories and the ambiguities involved in their local application. In particular, phrases such as “a distinctive relationship to the process of production” and labels such as “proletariat” show the influence of Marxist rhetoric. However, the observation that there are “innumerable groupings” or “sub-classes” threatens to weaken the Marxist influenced claim that only two main groupings dominate the social structure. The Fabians seem to overcome this difficulty by arguing that although in reality a number of classes may exist based on economic criteria, in consciousness there are only two main “common causes”. As David Cannadine points out, Marx himself “was less interested in class as objective social description (‘in itself’), than in class as subjective social formation (‘for itself’)”.⁴⁴ Nevertheless, as Cannadine observes, “the best that could be said of Marx’s three class-conscious classes...was that they were ideal types, historical abstractions, which grossly over-simplified the way in which the social structure...had actually evolved and developed”. As these contemporaries evidently also observed, Cannadine notes that within Marx’s “supposedly inclusive class categories, there were many internal divisions”. According to Cannadine, history has shown that “the shared class characteristics and clear-cut class boundaries...rarely if ever existed in fact”.⁴⁵ Perhaps this is why even Cope’s strongly Marxist interpretation, while insistent on a “main class-division”, also points out that the “division of labour” is “complex”, and that there is no actual “sharp line of division” between the two classes.

The evident lack of clear class distinctions may be why a number of the academics and polemicists stress the complexities involved in describing New Zealand’s social structure. Judging by the general ambiguity in talking about social distinctions and possible classes, the contemporary New Zealand environment was not overly friendly

⁴³ NZFS, pp.6-7.

⁴⁴ D. Cannadine, *Class in Britain*, London, 2000, pp.2-4.

⁴⁵ Cannadine, p.9.

to the direct application of overseas or traditional class theories. For those not wishing to interpret class in New Zealand through either a strongly Marxist or egalitarian lens, the alternatives seem to be rather hazy. Ernest Beaglehole talks about the “amorphous, but nonetheless very real class-structuring of New Zealand”, and argues that “membership in a particular class is fixed by an interacting complex of factors of which income or wealth is one, but not the only or necessarily the most important factor”.⁴⁶ In his view, New Zealand has a “hierarchically ordered...class-system” in which various “strata” display “a relative homogeneity of attitudes, ideas, beliefs and practices – a class-consciousness”. Ernest Beaglehole’s varying emphasis on both objective and subjective class elements does not add up to a very clear picture of the social structure.

But his uncertainty about precise class definitions is widely shared by other academics and polemicists. In his discussion of “the conditioning basis of New Zealand politics”, Lipson struggles to classify a “solid central bloc of voters” using Marxist terminology. He begins by pointing out that this core of voters, “composed of all people with small incomes and slender reserves”, “is not, strictly speaking, a proletariat”. He concludes by stating, somewhat unconvincingly, that “accurately defined, they are sociologically and economically a lesser bourgeoisie”.⁴⁷ Ernest Beaglehole attributes the local tendency for ambiguous class classifications to a lack of local research about this subject, yet still concludes that “by comparison with English society New Zealand class-lines are not so strictly or so overtly defined”.⁴⁸ External points of reference seem to provide the only convincing answer for these contemporaries about what New Zealand’s social structure looks, or rather does not look, like.

The “Middle-Class”

To reiterate; in the sources as a whole two assumptions are commonly made. One is that a Marxist-influenced interpretation of two dichotomously positioned “economic classes” is relevant, if difficult to apply. The second assumption is that Britain’s class

⁴⁶ E. Beaglehole, “Race, Caste, and Class”, *Journal of the Polynesian Society*, 52, 1, (1943), pp.8-9.

⁴⁷ Lipson, pp.233-4.

⁴⁸ E. Beaglehole, “Race, Caste, and Class”, pp.8-9.

structure is a useful frame of reference for describing New Zealand's social structure. Yet the recognised problem of how to classify those who belong neither to the "proletariat" nor to the "capitalist class" threatens to undermine both these assumptions. The focus of those who assume the existence of classes in New Zealand tends to be on the hierarchical relationship between a wealthy minority and a working majority. However, the existence of a middle group or class between "capital" and "labour" is sometimes perceived. The problem arises when these contemporaries try to describe and label those in the middle. Cope notes that the members of the "so-called middle-class", at "first sight do not seem to 'classify'", for they are "neither obviously exploited, nor are they obvious exploiters". He concludes that "it is not really an oversimplification to say that at the present time the underlying conflict is between two main classes".⁴⁹ Evidently there are problems in applying Marxist notions of class "exploitation", and the traditional or British notion of a "middle-class", to the New Zealand context. Perhaps as a consequence, the term "middle-class" is rarely used.

Interestingly, the few academics and polemicists who have referred to the "middle-class" tend to assume that it is a significant and even characteristic element of New Zealand society. McCormick praises Robin Hyde's novel *The Godwits Fly* for depicting an "entirely new stratum of experience", not the "two extremes" of poverty and wealth, but an "intermediate class more typical of New Zealand". The "middle-class household", adds McCormick, is the "ordinary New Zealand".⁵⁰ Condliffe enthuses that New Zealand "receives among her immigrants a large proportion of the educated middle class", adding vaguely that this "tradition" has become "a powerful factor in its own perpetuation".⁵¹ Arthur Fairburn's characterisation of the "middle-class" provides a little more detail of their "perpetuation". Fairburn laments the growth of a "parasitic" and "dominant" "middle-class" engaged in "dull and specialised" work, which has created a "new form of social life – the life of the suburbs".⁵² These assumptions raise some important questions. If the "middle-class" is so characteristic

⁴⁹ Cope, pp.13-14.

⁵⁰ E.H. McCormick, *Letters and Art in New Zealand*, Wellington, 1940, p.177.

⁵¹ Condliffe, *New Zealand in the Making*, p.439.

⁵² A.R.D. Fairburn, *We New Zealanders: an Informal Essay*, Wellington, 1944, p.27.

of New Zealand society, why do the academics and polemicists spend so little time describing or even acknowledging it? Perhaps explanation is not required of a class that is seen as so obviously “ordinary” or “dominant”. Alternatively, the assumption might be that everybody is equally considered, and undistinguished as a member of one big “middle” group. Certainly, the disparate, dominant interpretations of New Zealand as largely classless or mainly divided between two classes seem to have forced only a minor focus on those in the “middle”.

Ideals and Realities of Inequality in Education and Politics

The adoption of Marxist theory or egalitarian ideals clearly poses problems in interpretations of class in the local context. Looking at these sources as a whole, the general recognition is that society was neither strongly divided on class lines, nor completely egalitarian and classless. The recognition, though, seems to have resulted in a lack of clarity and certainty about what class and social distinction in New Zealand actually looked like.

The ambiguity is well illustrated in discussions of the education system. Generally, the common perception is that a class-free, egalitarian system is the most desirable. Yet there is much disagreement among the academics and polemicists over whether this system is an actuality or an unrealised ideal. Cope argues that the contemporary education system is “based not on equality of opportunity but upon the privileges and relatively excessive wealth which accrue to the owners”.⁵³ Arthur Butchers criticises the “endowed secondary schools” for being “more than ever ‘class’ schools maintained principally at the nation’s expense”,⁵⁴ and a “privilege of the rich”.⁵⁵ Sutch criticises the system for stacking the cards “against the children of parents in the low income groups”.⁵⁶ In his opinion, “the function of the larger secondary schools is to produce recruits for the professions”, while “that of the technical schools to produce recruits for the factories”. There is a “resulting social cleavage”, Sutch maintains,

⁵³ Cope, p.19.

⁵⁴ A.G. Butchers, *Education in New Zealand: an Historical Survey of Educational Progress Amongst the Europeans and the Maoris Since 1978*, Dunedin, 1930, p.97.

⁵⁵ Butchers, p.328.

⁵⁶ W.B. Sutch, *The Quest for Security in New Zealand*, Harmondsworth, 1942, p.148.

which means that “the education system is still perpetuating New Zealand’s economic and social inequalities”.⁵⁷

Such critical images of an education system based on hierarchy, status, and occupational distinctions are contested. As outlined earlier, academics such as Campbell, Belshaw, and Wood argue that equality is the predominant feature of New Zealand’s education system, and that class is much more an overseas phenomenon than a local reality. Yet even among these contemporaries there is variation in interpretation as to the actual degree of equality and classlessness in education. Campbell, for example, concedes that “[a]lthough they are no longer exclusive, secondary schools tend to be patronised by professional people and other groups of better-than-average income”.⁵⁸ Wood is also in agreement that “[b]eyond a certain point...equality of opportunity has proved illusory” in education, and notes how “for the most part the more expensive professional schools, notably the medical, have been the special preserve of those whose parents could afford to invest considerable sums in their education”.⁵⁹ Lipson might see that an “ingrained equalitarian temper...dominates and regulates” the education system and “everything that happens in the community”.⁶⁰ However, according to many of his peers, egalitarian ideals were not fully realised in the education system, especially in the upper levels.

In interpretations of the political system, moreover, academics’ and polemicists’ apparently egalitarian ideals are threatened by an underlying assumption of class conflict. Again, contemporary awareness of traditional or overseas class rhetoric is demonstrated, even among those who emphasise the egalitarianism of the system. Alfred Reed agrees that the Labour Party might have been formed “with the object of promoting the interest of those who are called ‘workers’”. In his opinion, though, by the 1940s a “coming together, a levelling up” of the past “great gulf between employers and ‘workers’, between capitalism and labour, rich and poor” had

⁵⁷ Sutch, *Quest for Security*, p.155.

⁵⁸ Campbell, p.230.

⁵⁹ Wood, p.143.

⁶⁰ Lipson, p.488.

occurred.⁶¹ Wood also recognises how the “official objective of the New Zealand Labour party, ‘socialization of the means of production, distribution, and exchange’, was described frequently enough in terms taken from European thinkers”. Despite the recognition, Wood maintains that “in practice its governing tradition is native to New Zealand”, and that no one “who had seen or listened to Michael Joseph Savage...could think of him and his government in terms of a class war”.⁶² These contemporaries appear to be directly reacting against a traditional notion of a “class war” or central “class division” between “workers” and “capitalists”.

Another apparent method of disengaging the traditional class connotations of the Labour Party is to emphasise how “workers” are much less a class than typical “New Zealanders”. The “good conditions he has won for himself”, writer and politician Walter Nash asserted of the “New Zealand worker”, are “backed by a government which has introduced and is pledged to extend the legislation that has brought these guarantees”.⁶³ John Beaglehole even concludes that workers “tend to look at their problems as New Zealanders rather than as members of a class”.⁶⁴ The emphasis on national consciousness counteracts, and is perhaps a deliberate reaction to, the notion of class consciousness.

Certainly, these assertions of classlessness are strongly disputed by other observations of the influence of class conflict and consciousness in politics. In examining the effect of the “rise of the Labour party”, political historian Leicester Webb drew parallels with overseas political contests, concluding that both locally and internationally “the class conflict has become the main political cleavage”.⁶⁵ Possibly the overseas connection softens the blow of stating that class is an issue in this egalitarian society. Webb describes the cleavage between the “Left”, which formally adheres “to socialism”, and the “Right”, which champions “private enterprise”. These party alignments, Webb maintains, while being “restrained and complicated”, nevertheless

⁶¹ A.H. Reed, *The Story of New Zealand*, Wellington, 1945, pp.480-81.

⁶² Wood, p.19.

⁶³ W. Nash, *New Zealand: a Working Democracy*, New York, 1943, pp.63-64.

⁶⁴ J.C. Beaglehole, *Introduction to New Zealand*, Wellington, 1945, p.70.

⁶⁵ L.C. Webb, *Government in New Zealand*, Wellington, 1940, p.21.

“show that the present party system in New Zealand has its ultimate origin in an economic conflict between classes”.⁶⁶ These two classes, according to Webb, are represented “in the trade unions and in the various organisations which represent the capital-owning class”.⁶⁷

Other contemporaries are much more vitriolic than Webb⁶⁸ about the parties and classes associated with the apparent political cleavage. On one side, Arthur Field observes, “we have imported Socialist missionaries who have spent the last thirty years propagating a gospel of class hatred among the workers of New Zealand, and selling to the unthinking...the idea that if nobody owns anything everybody will own everything”. On the other side “are their political opponents, the errand boys for the financial interests, whose politics have never amounted to anything more than pawning everything pawnable”.⁶⁹ John Beaglehole criticises the Labour party for capitalising on “the tradition of amelioration of the lot of the common man without fatal harm to the interests of his masters”.⁷⁰ Positive portrayals of the “great levelling up” and the “good conditions” of the classless “New Zealand worker” are subverted by these images of class consciousness and exploitation. If only in, and between, the different interpretations of class and contemporary politics, a degree of conflict is undeniably present.

“Workers” and the “Other Class”

Regardless of whether they are stressing egalitarianism or class conflict, or indeed both, the academics and polemicists tend to assume that “workers” are a majority social group. Yet despite their assumed centrality and numerical majority, “workers” are often characterised as the losers in the equation; the labour producing the profits for capital, or the poor exploited by the wealthy. These two assumptions about workers; their centrality to society and their subordination within it, may be mutually

⁶⁶ Webb, *Government*, pp.30-31.

⁶⁷ Webb, *Government*, p.143.

⁶⁸ That Webb’s interpretation itself appears restrained and somewhat ambiguous might be because the Labour government was commissioning his work as a centennial publication. The overlap between academic, polemical, and official images is explored in chapter four.

⁶⁹ A.N. Field, *The Truth About New Zealand*, Nelson, 1939, p.183.

⁷⁰ J.C. Beaglehole, *New Zealand: a Short History*, London, 1936, p.126.

supportive. Continual improvements in the social welfare of workers are obviously justified, for example, if they are seen as underprivileged. The elevation of workers, in ideal or reality, seems to be a valid focus in a society where egalitarianism is the dominant ethos.

Whether “workers” were seen to constitute a “class”, though, is difficult to tell given the great variety of characterisations. Even when strong class terms like “working class”, “labouring class”, and “wage earning class” are used, they are rarely accompanied by definition of the class boundaries. Technically, the generic term “workers” is inclusive of anyone who works, including all salary earners, rural labourers, and even the self-employed. But this broad category tends to be used in reference to only one type of “worker”. In the *Dictionary of New Zealand English*, a “worker” is defined as “a person who works, especially one doing manual labour”.⁷¹ Although often left unspecified, the definition seems to have been implicitly assumed by a number of contemporaries.

A.E.C. Hare, for instance, uses the term “workers” specifically in relation to urban, industrial workers. He asserts that industry not only determines “the way of life of the worker whilst he is at work, but also conditions his status in society and his way of life”.⁷² According to Hare, status “in society is chiefly an economic matter”, and it is “primarily a man’s income that society looks at when placing him in the social scale”. Workers, in Hare’s view, including “the ordinary unskilled worker and even many semi-skilled or skilled workers” constitute the “lowest income strata of society”, which prevents them “from enjoying the prestige which wealth brings with it”.⁷³ The assumption of the low economic status of “workers” is often made. But Hare’s explanation of how social status is assumed to be derivative of occupational or economic position is remarkably clear. Hare critically asserts through his discussion of “workers” that there are strong social and economic distinctions and disparities

⁷¹ H.W. Orsman & N. Wattie, *The Reed Dictionary of New Zealand English: the First Dictionary of New Zealand English and New Zealand Pronunciation*, Auckland, 2001, p.1332.

⁷² A.E.C. Hare, *Report on Industrial Relations in New Zealand*, Wellington, 1946, p.13.

⁷³ Hare, *Report*, pp.32-35.

between “strata”. Hare is exceptional in that he has at least partly specified and contextualised his perceptions of “workers”. Overall, it remains uncertain whether invisible groups within the category of “workers” are also attributed with low status, or are being ignored for the sake of the general argument.

In dichotomous or two-class interpretations of society, “workers” are one partner in a conflicting, unequal relationship. The role of the other partner is usually that of distant victimisers or exploiters. The terms commonly used to describe this group are abundant and diverse; they are the “employing or capitalist class”,⁷⁴ “the few who have power”,⁷⁵ “the ruling class”,⁷⁶ “the wealthy class”,⁷⁷ or simply, in the words of Alex Galbraith, “the other class”.⁷⁸ Objective or economic distinctions in income and occupation are commonly cited as the chief differences between “workers” and this “other class”. The class differences, though, are sometimes described in much more subjective terms of social consciousness and relationships. In Hare’s view, misunderstanding can arise because the “the employer and the workers...are drawn from very different classes in society, with different degrees of education and a different social outlook”.⁷⁹ Galbraith argues that “there is not the slightest doubt about it that the cold-blooded ethics of the exploiting class justifies them...having the right to ‘legally’ exploit us”.⁸⁰ Notably, A.R.D. Fairburn’s critique is based less on the recognition of economic distinctions informed by Marxist rhetoric than on the recognition of social or cultural distinctions informed partly from egalitarian rhetoric. Fairburn criticises an “elite” group of “people who have succeeded in making money, and who regard themselves on that account as constituting a kind of aristocracy”. They “consistently neglect the arts”, Fairburn mocks, unless “it has a certain snob-value”,

⁷⁴ F.W. Rowley, *The Industrial Situation in New Zealand*, Wellington, 1931, pp.xii-xiii.

⁷⁵ A.R. Low, *Work and Wealth in Christian Order*, Christchurch, 1942, p.6.

⁷⁶ S. Scott, *New Order for New Zealand*, Auckland, 1941, p.12.

⁷⁷ Fairburn, *We New Zealanders*, pp.22-23.

⁷⁸ A. Galbraith, *Reminiscences of the Early History of the Communist Party of New Zealand*, Private Ownership, 1949, p.6.

⁷⁹ Hare, *Report*, p.44.

⁸⁰ Galbraith, p.23.

they “build large and very vulgar houses”, and they “send their children to private schools, so that they may avoid the contamination of ‘the mob’ ”.⁸¹

Wood’s largely egalitarian interpretation of society echoes some of Fairburn’s disdain for exclusiveness and elitism. He comments on how “New Zealand has developed a rudimentary hierarchy which is none the less important because the community as a whole is dominated by the notions of equality and security”. The “doctor, the lawyer, the bank manager, and the manager of the stock and station agency”, Wood argues, have joined “with the successful farmer to form a fairly well defined group”. Wood subtly belittles this “group” by describing it as a “relic of the English social strata”, and attributing its existence to “something of an old-world tendency to split up into separate segments, each one of which scarcely knows how the others live and think”.⁸² Even Wood’s comparatively gentle critique is harsh in its excommunication of a local “rudimentary hierarchy” as the relic of an overseas class system. The elite are relegated to the outskirts of a society in which egalitarianism ideals dominate. Indeed, as Lipson observed, the egalitarianism “that provides for all within the group, can be hostile toward those who reject the group standards or who are outside the membership”.⁸³

Aside from these few examples, most academics and polemicists seem disinclined to consider the perspective of the “other class”. While those who are perceived to be wealthy, privileged, or powerful are barely given agency in these sources, a number of contemporaries seem keen to argue on behalf of “workers”. Communist party member Alex Galbraith’s asserted affiliation with the “working-class” is exceptionally unhesitant. He describes himself as one of “New Zealand’s battling toilers unselfishly advocating my class needs”.⁸⁴ More commonly, a degree of intimacy with “workers”, or at least compassion for their plight, seems to have been assumed by these contemporaries as desirable. A “worker naturally feels that a system is wrong”,

⁸¹ Fairburn, *We New Zealanders*, pp.22-23.

⁸² Wood, p.235.

⁸³ Lipson, p.492.

⁸⁴ Galbraith, p.21.

Fortescue Rowley maintains, “under which one section of the community is permitted to make unlimited profits, and acquire great wealth...while another section innocently suffers great hardship”.⁸⁵ Galbraith also argues that “it is obvious that in the class system of Society with such opposing interests (diametrically opposite) that the present fight for the independent role of the working class is a vital one”. “There can be no hesitancy”, he concludes, “the working class must be opposed against the other class”.⁸⁶ In the belief that this ambiguously defined “other class” is a valid target for criticism, a common bond is found between apparently opposed Marxist and egalitarian interpretations.

Class, Gender, and Race

A final point must be made about the general failure of these contemporaries to focus on how gender and race are related to class. In the sources examined, ethnic minorities and women are usually either ignored, or separately examined in works such as Helen Simpson’s research on early pioneer women⁸⁷ and the work included in *The Maori People Today*. The use of masculine pronouns is almost invariable; the worker is “the common man”⁸⁸ and members of the “capitalist class” are “professional or business men”.⁸⁹ While this might have been an accepted convention, the problem is that women are denied a voice or a distinctive presence.

While the majority of the mainly male academics and polemicists seem to be unconscious of the relation between gender and class, some female polemicists were very clear about the connections. Caroline Webb argued in a 1947 article in the *New Zealand Listener* that “New Zealand mothers, at any rate, are all working class – that is, we all do our own work”. While she saw New Zealand “as approaching a one-class society” and greater equality, Webb argued for the need for mothers to join “forces with the [female] wage-earners in their demand for equality between the sexes”, and

⁸⁵ Rowley, p.118.

⁸⁶ Galbraith, pp.5-6.

⁸⁷ See: H.M. Simpson, *The Women of New Zealand*, Wellington, 1940.

⁸⁸ J.C. Beaglehole, *New Zealand*, p.126.

⁸⁹ Belshaw, “Economic Organisation”, p.109.

particularly “economic equality”.⁹⁰ Equality and classlessness are strong, well-articulated ideals in most of the academic and polemical works examined. The notion that these ideals are not as well matched in actuality is evidenced in such perceptions of economic and social inequality between the sexes.

The influence of European theories and concepts of class have also impinged on the few interpretations of the relationship between race and class. Ivan Sutherland simply states that Maori are a “brown-skinned class”.⁹¹ Ernest Beaglehole argues that “Maori classes and White classes do not coincide” and are instead “polarised”. The Maori “class-system” is seen as distinctively separate, based primarily on genealogically determined “hierarchical strata” and only secondarily on “European ideas of wealth”. Beaglehole appears unaware that imposing this “cultural” class system on both “ancient Maori society and also the more or less elastically defined modern Maori society” is idiosyncratic, not to mention ethnocentric. For someone who had bemoaned the lack of local knowledge on class, it seems strange that a Maori class system is so clearly assumed. Yet even Beaglehole, in attempting to explain his perceptions, admits that the picture is “complicated”.⁹² The complications almost certainly arise from attempting to apply European notions of “class” and “status” to a traditionally tribal, non-European society and ethnic grouping.

The mostly unaddressed issue of race also complicates and threatens to contradict assumptions of equality. The failure of Maori and Europeans to “coincide” is not simply attributed by Ernest Beaglehole to different “class-systems”, but to the “lower class ascription” of Maori within European society. The “White classes”, Beaglehole maintains, display a “tendency to rank most Maori in a group equivalent in status to that of the lowest-class White group”.⁹³ There is an implicit shared assumption among these academics and polemicists that Maori should be interpreted within a European

⁹⁰ C. Webb, “Mothers Can’t Form a Pressure Group”, *New Zealand Listener*, 7 March 1947, pp.10-11, cit. C. MacDonald, *The Vote, the Pill and the Demon Drink: a History of Feminist Writing in New Zealand, 1869-1993*, Wellington, 1993, pp.135-7.

⁹¹ I.L.G. Sutherland, “The Maori Situation”, in I.L.G. Sutherland, ed., *The Maori People Today: a General Survey*, Wellington, 1940, p.341.

⁹² E. Beaglehole, “Race, Caste, and Class”, pp.8-11.

⁹³ E. Beaglehole, “Race, Caste, and Class”, p.9.

frame of reference. Roger Duff argues that as “a group the Maoris [sic] are a rural proletariat”, and that the “typical Maori householder of today is a person of mixed blood...ranking socially as a European of the casual labouring class”.⁹⁴ Marxist terminology is hashed with Maori culture and notions of the dominance of a European social structure. Belshaw compares ideals of equality with the reality of the unenviable Maori social and economic position. If the Maori “fails to stand on his own feet in the economic struggle”, according to Belshaw, “his” race will be “reduced to the position of a submerged class”. Such a “status of inferiority”, Belshaw adds, “may well bring to the *pakeha* that consciousness of superiority and clash of economic interest out of which racial conflict is born”.⁹⁵ Covert assumptions both of the segregation and inferiority of Maori colour the overt European claims of equality. The typical representation of a European male society in these sources is made more significant in realising who it does not represent.

Conclusion

In general, only a few contemporaries recognised the discrepancy between ideals and actualities of classlessness and egalitarianism, and stratification and inequality. Cope, for instance, charged on with his Marxist-influenced interpretation of New Zealand society, even as he observed the actual lack of clear class divisions. As Wood concluded, neither “social barriers nor...lack of economic resources for a healthy life, prevent New Zealand from becoming a democracy in actual practice as well as in accepted theory”.⁹⁶ The key point is that New Zealand is still “becoming” like the “accepted theory”.

Some of these discrepancies have been commented on in the historiography. Until very recently, David Pitt argues, “the official and intellectual ideology was that New

⁹⁴ R. Duff, “South Island Maoris”, in I.L.G. Sutherland, ed., *The Maori People Today: a General Survey*, Wellington, 1940, pp.385, 388.

⁹⁵ H. Belshaw, “Maori Economic Circumstances”, in I.L.G. Sutherland, ed., *The Maori People Today: a General Survey*, Wellington, 1940, pp.184-5.

⁹⁶ Wood, p.241.

Zealand is, was, and should be, an egalitarian society".⁹⁷ Even "those who were aware of discrepancies in the egalitarian myth tended to rationalise them away", Pitt adds. H.G. Oxley provides a perceptive explanation of how such apparent discrepancies tend to have been rationalised in these academic and polemical sources. As he points out, egalitarian ideas "must be set in a context of inequality if they are to have any meaning" and the "egalitarian even needs to have a few snobs or exploiters in sight to put the necessary frame of vice around his picture of virtue".⁹⁸ This could explain why an elite minority was often included in representations of a largely classless or "workers" society. The "exploiting" class might provide "the necessary frame of vice" around the picture of the virtuous, "egalitarian" majority. The international frame of reference also provided highly favourable meaning to the weaker class distinctions and inequality in New Zealand. The points of both external and internal comparison between "us" and "them" seem to have shaped these academics' and polemicists' beliefs in, and arguments about, the degree of social equality.

The great variation in these contemporary academics' and polemicists' views of class and society is a finding unique to this study. Given his concern over the pervasive influence of egalitarian ideology in 1930s and 1940s New Zealand society, Leslie Lipson might have been much relieved at this "clash of opinion". As revealed in chapter four, the assumption of a conflict-free society where class is apparently an aberration is much more pervasive among contemporary politicians and officials.

⁹⁷ D. Pitt, "Are There Social Classes in New Zealand?", in D. Pitt, ed., *Social Class in New Zealand*, Auckland, 1977, p.5.

⁹⁸ H.G. Oxley, *Mateship in Local Organisation: a Study of Egalitarianism, Stratification, Leadership, and Amenities Projects in a Semi-Industrial Community in Inland New South Wales*, St Lucia, 1974, p.25.

Chapter 4

Official and Political “Class” Imagery

Introduction and Sources

The focus of this chapter is on how a range of politicians, public servants, and other government officials debated and reported the existence of class. While this reveals a number of variations from the academic and polemical assumptions discussed in chapter three, there are two shared themes.

The first theme relates to the difficulty social commentators face in disentangling their subjective and objective observations of society. The ostensible objective of most official reports is to be categorically value-free or neutral. Yet as Ruth Levitas and Will Guy point out, even “the very categories that are used are the outcome of implicit theories about social life and social relationships – theories that are obscured by claims to neutrality and objectivity”.¹ This analysis is not primarily concerned with ascertaining if the Government has “cooked the books”; “delaying, suppressing, abolishing and manipulating data for its own political ends”.² Rather, the key point is that official sources are hardly “less susceptible to subjective influences than other sources”.³ Even as they are required to stand outside and observe, officials are still “insiders” of the contemporary society. They are therefore at least aware of, if not also influenced by, current and traditional beliefs and rhetoric about class. As Joan Wallach Scott observes, assuming that official sources are value-free “presumes to divide an indivisible or integral problem, that of the nature of reality and representation”.⁴

The second theme relates to this problem. A belief in traditional egalitarian ideology,

¹ R. Levitas & W. Guy, “Introduction”, in R. Levitas & W. Guy, eds, *Interpreting Official Statistics*, London, 1996, pp.1-2.

² R. Levitas, “The Legacy of Rayner”, in R. Levitas & W. Guy, eds, *Interpreting Official Statistics*, London, 1996, p.16.

³ J.W. Scott, “A Statistical Representation of Work: La Statistique De L’Industrie A Paris, 1847-1848”, in J.W. Scott, ed., *Gender and the Politics of History*, New York, 1999, p.115.

⁴ Scott, p.115.

and the assumption that New Zealand was largely classless, is often implicit in the sources examined. Whether such ideals are also seen as actualities, however, is difficult to tell given the way the possible existence of inequality and social distinction tends to be disregarded and even downplayed. "Class", as a subject and a word, is apparently considered irrelevant or too contentious to warrant much official application and attention. An all-consuming focus is on the egalitarian aims and "levelling" achievements of the government's social welfare legislation. Possible inequalities, which may have precipitated the need for the legislation in the first place, tend to be ignored, ambiguously described, or of only minor concern. The existence of economic and social inequality is sometimes explicitly recognised, and particularly by Labour politicians during the early 1930s. Significantly, by the late 1930s, if Labour politicians ever mention class, the lack of inequality rather than the lack of equality is the dominant emphasis. In general, status distinctions, the subordination of "workers", and disparities between rich and poor are three less common perceptions and criticisms in the official and political sources.

Providing some contextual detail of these varying perceptions aids the critical assessment of their meaning. The 1930s and 1940s were a significant period in New Zealand's political and legislative history, and there is a great volume of available primary material. Notably, one of the major limitations of Arthur Marwick's similar study of "official class imagery" is that by attempting to "review large amounts of evidence", "the result is necessarily more broad than deep".⁵ Michael Katz points out that Marwick summarises complex studies "in a few sentences, few are explored with any depth, and one is not sure exactly why or how he selected material".⁶ His criticism provides a cautionary guide to the more narrow selection of sources and subjects in this study. Broadly speaking, the focus has been limited to discussion concerning social welfare or security. Official sources that refer to topics like state housing, labour and industrial relations, superannuation, and education are examined. The initial hypothesis is that such sources will provide key insight into how officials and

⁵ M.B. Katz, "Review: A. Marwick, *Class: Image and Reality in Britain, France and the USA Since 1930*", *Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, 12, 2, (1981), p.367.

⁶ Katz, p.367.

politicians discussed inequality and social distinction during the 1930s and 1940s.

In inferring the different personal and likely purposes behind each official source, the different rhetoric and understandings about class are better understood. Eight types of "officials" and sources are included in this study,⁷ organised into four chapter subsections.

The first "officials" to be examined are the public servants and statisticians who were employed by the government to write the *Official New Zealand Yearbooks*.⁸ These officials are expected to be as neutral as possible, to provide a factual resource of information for other researchers and contemporaries to interpret. That the "facts" may be already subtly shaped by their presentation is an issue addressed in the chapter.

The second section includes all royal commissions, selected committees of inquiry, and specific parliamentary committees published in the *Appendices to the Journals of the House of Representatives*.⁹ A range of "officials" were involved in these committees, including public servants and politicians, experts such as doctors,¹⁰ and representatives of "organised sections"¹¹ of the community such as trade unionists¹² and feminists.¹³ Generally, these inquiries and investigations were "instituted by, or on behalf of, the government".¹⁴

The third section provides highly specific discussions of class in relation to education and labour, taken from every yearly report during the 1930s and 1940s by the minister

⁷ For a list of all the sources consulted in this study, refer to the chapter's bibliography.

⁸ Due to the lack of strong variation between years, every second *Yearbook* from 1930 to 1948 was examined.

⁹ The selection was aided by referring to: E. Robertson & P.H. Hughes, *A Checklist: New Zealand Royal Commissions, Commissions, and Committees of Inquiry, 1864-1981*, Wellington, 1982. Due to the number of committees, the criterion for their selection was a reference number indicating their inclusion in the *Appendices to the Journals of the House of Representatives* (AJHR), denoting that the committees and inquiries were considered important enough to include in a government publication.

¹⁰ See: "Committee of Inquiry into Maternity Services", AJHR, 1938, H31A, 325, pp.1-112.

¹¹ P. Campbell, *Politicians, Public Servants, and the People in New Zealand*, Oxford, 1956, p.204.

¹² See: "Committee on Unemployment in New Zealand", AJHR 1930, H11B, 301, pp.1-36.

¹³ See: "Committee of Inquiry into the Various Aspects of the Problem of Abortion in New Zealand", AJHR, 1937, H31A, 318, pp.1-28.

¹⁴ Robertson & Hughes, p.7.

of education and department of labour. These "officials" are implicated in both the "administration and publicity"¹⁵ of government. Politicians such as Peter Fraser, who was the minister of education from 1935-1940 and Prime Minister from 1940-1949,¹⁶ are likely to have some vested interest in emphasising the successes of their party's policies and objectives.

The last section concerns subject-related *New Zealand Parliamentary Debates* and government-commissioned or published reports.¹⁷ The reports are written by politicians or high-ranking public servants such as Clarence Beeby. The debates are between a range of well-known and less prominent local and parliamentary representatives of the different political parties. Politicians arguing the need for a new government are likely to critically observe inequality and distinctions in the present society. Politicians defending their government are likely to emphasise its egalitarian achievements and be politically diffident about class inequality.

Simply by generally inferring and suggesting some of the personnel and purposes behind the different official sources examined, one is already provided with an explanation for the shift in emphasis of Labour politicians from the late 1930s onwards. While society may have indeed become more egalitarian and classless during this period, what definitely occurred was the coming to power of the Labour party. It is difficult to be conclusive about the objectives of these sources. However, the contention that these different officials were influenced by the social and political context they were attempting to objectively describe is highly plausible.

¹⁵ Campbell, p.200.

¹⁶ G.H. Scholefield, *New Zealand Parliamentary Record, 1840-1949*, Wellington, 1950, pp.49-50.

¹⁷ Given the limited scope of this study, one is forced to be selective. A range of debates and reports about the various chosen topics was chosen for examination, aided by reference to: C.V. Baldock, "Stratification and Social Welfare", in A.D. Trlin, ed., *Social Welfare and New Zealand Society*, Wellington, 1977, pp.132-53; G. Ferguson, *Building the New Zealand Dream*, Palmerston North, 1994; E. Hanson, *The Politics of Social Security: the 1938 Act and Some Later Developments*, Auckland, 1980; M. McClure, *A Civilised Community: a History of Social Security in New Zealand, 1898-1998*, Auckland, 1998; E. Olssen, "Depression and War (1939-41)", in K. Sinclair, ed., *The Oxford Illustrated History of New Zealand*, Auckland, 1996, pp.211-35; W.H. Oliver, "The Origins and Growth of the Welfare State", in A.D. Trlin, ed., *Social Welfare and New Zealand Society*, Wellington, 1977, pp.1-28.

Official Yearbooks

The egalitarian ethos of the academic and polemical “imagery” is sustained in the *Yearbooks*. The discussion of social structure and relationships is apparently not in the repertoire of *Yearbook* writers. There is no official schema of the class structure, such as the comparatively explicit schema used by British officials for analytical purposes in the post-war era.¹⁸ There is also no standard set of categories with which officials describe class. In contrast to the academic and polemical sources, strong class categories loaded with specific assumptions like “proletariat” and “upper-class” are never used. Indeed, if the term “class” is ever used in the *Yearbooks*, it seems to be devoid of much connotation. David Cannadine observes that during the nineteenth-century, British officials understood class as “no more (and no less) than an objective social category, which grouped individuals together on the basis of their shared economic characteristics”. These classes, Cannadine adds, were emphasised as “inert, inanimate social aggregations; they did not do, feel or achieve anything collectively”.¹⁹ Asa Briggs also notes how before the rise of modern industry in Britain the word “class” was reserved generally for “reference to subdivisions in schemes of ‘classification’ ”.²⁰ Class seems to take on very similar meaning in the *Yearbooks* to how it was traditionally and officially understood in Britain.

One example is the tendency of the *Yearbooks* to group or classify individuals only according to the shared economic characteristic of “income”. The 1942 *Yearbook* talks about a “classification on the basis of class”, and then describes the classes on the sole basis of differences in income.²¹ Throughout the period there is repeated discussion of different “classes of income”,²² or “income categories”,²³ and phrases such as lower and higher “income groups”,²⁴ are used. Acknowledging the possibility of social differences between, and the actual people within these classes, does not seem to be

¹⁸ See: R. Levitas & W. Guy, *Interpreting Official Statistics*, London, 1996.

¹⁹ D. Cannadine, *Class in Britain*, London, 2000, p.3.

²⁰ A. Briggs, “The Language of ‘Class’ in Early Nineteenth-Century England”, in M.W. Flinn & T.C. Smout, eds, *Essays in Social History*, London, 1974, p.154.

²¹ Department of Statistics, *Official New Zealand Yearbook (ONZY)*, Wellington, 1942, p.636.

²² ONZY, 1942, p.647.

²³ ONZY, 1930, p.809.

²⁴ ONZY, 1930, pp.819-20.

within the scope of the *Yearbooks*. The understanding of classes as “inert, inanimate social aggregations”²⁵ in the *Yearbooks* is particularly evident in the schemes of industrial and occupational classification. People are only inanimately implicated in the classes. Class is used to “classify” occupations only in a most basic technical sense. The *Yearbooks* talk about “industrial groups” and “industrial divisions”.²⁶ Yet in contrast to the academic and polemical imagery, no connections are made between these “industrial divisions” and industrial conflict or social distinctions. As Marwick found in his study of official sources, the *Yearbooks* appear to take “a functional view of society as being made up of basic economic interests” rather than of “social classes”.²⁷

An implicit emphasis of the *Yearbooks* from the late 1930s is on inclusiveness and equality. In discussing income-tax, the *Yearbooks* point out that “statistics are compiled from all taxpayers...irrespective of the amount of income derived”.²⁸ Similarly, the 1942 *Yearbook* stresses that “every person” is entitled to superannuation benefits, “without conditions as to income or property”.²⁹ The officials writing the *Yearbooks* must have been aware that some inequality and social distinctions existed. The government’s “code” is described in the 1940 *Yearbook* as the attempt “at equalising the distribution of the national income”. In the same paragraph, the “provision for the erection of homes of a good standard to be let to workers” is mentioned.³⁰ The need to specifically provide “workers” with homes is not explained. In general, official discussions of the huge range and volume of labour legislation designed “for the protection of the wage-earner”³¹ serve to support the idea of an egalitarian society in which social classes are undistinguished. No explicit explanation is given as from what, or who, workers are being protected. Social class may be an irrelevant notion to these ostensibly objective sources. Nevertheless, considering the

²⁵ Cannadine, p.3.

²⁶ ONZY, 1930, p.894.

²⁷ A. Marwick, *Class: Image and Reality in Britain, France, and the USA Since 1930*, Houndmills, 1990, p.69.

²⁸ ONZY, 1942, p.635.

²⁹ ONZY, 1942, p.495.

³⁰ ONZY, 1940, p.821.

³¹ ONZY, 1930, p.862.

detail in which the aims and desired outcomes of social welfare legislation is discussed, it is interesting that the social or economic causes are hardly mentioned. This suggests that the *Yearbooks*' neutral presentations of society are actually somewhat selective or one-sided in focus.

The welfare and labour legislation, as extensively reported in the *Yearbooks*, stipulates about everything from annual holidays to minimum rates of pay for workers. The pertinent question over what position "workers" were in to necessitate such action remains unanswered. A possible clue may lie in the 1930 *Yearbook*'s association of the term "poorer classes" with "workers".³² Whether the two terms are considered synonymous, or only certain workers are considered poor, is not made clear. This is conspicuously the only time the *Yearbooks* make the association. Since they were the targets of extensive legislation, "workers" logically needed to be officially acknowledged. The 1930 *Yearbook* gives a relatively clear definition of what the term "workers" is taken to mean. A worker is "any person who has entered into, or works under, a contract of service or apprenticeship with an employer, whether by way of manual labour, clerical work, or otherwise, and whether remunerated by wages, salary or otherwise".³³ The relationship and distinction between "workers" as employees and their "employers" is at least acknowledged, if only in a most basic, technical sense. A number of the academics and polemicists argued that social welfare legislation was needed because of the inequality between labouring workers and self-serving employers. Yet according to how "workers", "employers", and welfare and labour legislation were discussed in the *Yearbooks*, there was apparently little tension or social distinction between the two groups.

The use of any possibly litigious terms such as "poorer classes" tends to be absent in the *Yearbooks*. The desire to avoid such terms becomes evident when comparing the description of eligibility for family allowances in the 1932 and 1942 *Yearbooks*. In

³² ONZY, 1930, p.863.

³³ ONZY, 1930, p.865.

1932, the criterion is that parents must be of "limited income".³⁴ But by 1942, the possibly litigious word "limited" has been replaced with strictly monetary terms: the applicant's weekly income must not exceed five pounds.³⁵ Other than in relation to income and employment, class terminology or social distinctions appear to have been, to use Marwick's terms, "scrupulously avoided" in the *Yearbooks*.³⁶ Such a focus was surely influenced by the expectation on public servants to present a neutral and objective report of society. Arguably also, the government's desire to depict egalitarian progress may have played a part. In effect, regardless of the intention, the official stance reduces the danger of contradicting a picture of society as largely classless and conflict-free.

Royal Commissions, Parliamentary Committees, and Committees of Inquiry

While the commissions and committees examined are instituted by or on behalf of the government,³⁷ their members range from statisticians and representatives of the Communist Party to schoolteachers and members of the Roman Catholic Church. In general, discussions of class tend to be ambiguous or only a minor focus. At least in comparison with the *Yearbooks*, the existence of elements of hierarchy, inequality and social distinction in society are recognised more clearly and critically. The divergence is partly due to the wider scope of committees and commissions to talk about problems and issues; to make in-depth social comments rather than technical classifications.

A committee established "to inquire into and report upon the incidence of septic abortion", was specifically asked to locate the "underlying causes" and suggest remedies for the occurrence of abortion in New Zealand, "including medical, economic, social, and any other factors".³⁸ Poverty and "economic hardship" were

³⁴ ONZY, 1932, p.543.

³⁵ ONZY, 1942, p.498.

³⁶ Marwick, p.55.

³⁷ Robertson & Hughes, p.7.

³⁸ "Abortion Committee", AJHR, 1937, H31A, 318. Headed by D.G. McMillan, the committee included representatives from the Women's Branch of the New Zealand Labour Party, the Working Women's Movement, the National Council of Women, the Department of Statistics, the Presbyterian and Roman

cited as two strong causes, and the committee suggested that "the State might make provision for birth-control advice...in respect of overburdened and debilitated women of those classes who are not in a position to obtain it privately". The members of these classes are distinguished as "the unemployed, the wives of struggling farmers, and those on the lowest wage-levels". The committee also acknowledged how "the difficulties of many women whose husbands are in the lower-salaried groups, or in small businesses, for instance, are just as anxious".³⁹ The implication is that other classes are in a better or higher "position". Class is yet again understood primarily in terms of economic distinctions in income and occupation. Nonetheless, in contrast to the *Yearbooks*, some of the social ramifications of belonging to low and higher classes are critically recognised.

Stronger implications of status differences and hierarchy are evident in other committee reports. A 1938 committee established to inquire into the provision of maternity services made a specific connection between female domestic workers and status. The committee found that "the domestic worker is often looked down upon and made to feel that her position is an inferior one".⁴⁰ It urged that "all sections of the community" should endeavour to "place the service of the home on the footing which it merits".⁴¹ A committee established to comment on population growth and immigration also recognised that "in certain of the more well-to-do families the absence of domestic help is important, but domestic help has not been common in New Zealand as far as the rank and file of the community are concerned".⁴² The inclusive "community" seems to be a consuming, desirable focus of the committees and commissions.

Catholic Churches, the New Zealand Registered Nurses Association, and obstetricians and gynecologists from various hospitals.

³⁹ "Abortion Committee", AJHR, 1937, H31A, 318, p.14.

⁴⁰ "Maternity Services Committee", AJHR, 1938, H31A, 325, p.99. Headed by D.G. Macmillan, the committee consisted of "members of the medical profession, officers of the Health Department, Hospital Boards, and the members of their staffs, owners of private hospitals, and various women's societies". (p.3.)

⁴¹ "Maternity Services Committee", AJHR, 1938, H31A, 325, p.100.

⁴² "Dominion Population Committee", AJHR, 1946, I17, 342, p.95. A range of representatives from government departments such as the Customs, Labour, Health, and Social Security Departments was included in this committee, along with members of the Family Planning Association, the New Zealand Federation of Labour, the Treasury, and the Women's Committee of the New Zealand Communist Party.

Only occasionally are differences between classes or "sections" of the community delineated. A 1934 monetary committee made a comparatively strong distinction between a wealthy "business class" and largely nondescript "working" and "middle" classes.⁴³ The negative attitude towards the business class is apparent in the committee's segregation of this class from the favourably considered community. The committee warned how inflation "has been urged as a means of ridding the community of its internal debt burden and also of the capitalist-financier class", but that "experience has shown that after an inflation, the working and middle classes are worse off than before", and the "business class...seems always one step ahead". As in the *Yearbooks*, workers are a particular focus of this committee. Inflation is interpreted as "a blind force with an almost inevitable tendency to rob the working groups of the community", and reduce the "standard of living" of "the worker". The committee broadly defined the term "worker" as "the wage or salary earner",⁴⁴ which is similar to the 1930 *Yearbook* definition. Noticeably also, the committee is loosely implying aspects of inequality and dichotomy between the "capitalist-financier class" and the "working groups", echoing the assumptions of the academics and polemicists discussed in chapter three.

Implications of social distinctions are also made in a 1930 committee's report on education in New Zealand.⁴⁵ These are usually accompanied with an overriding emphasis on egalitarianism. Take, for example, the committee's comparison between early education in New Zealand and the present system. The "modern conception of free secondary schooling for *all* children, irrespective of their 'intelligence quotient' not less than of the social status of their parents, now ascendant in the thoughts of all",

⁴³ "Monetary Committee 1934", AJHR, 1934, B3, 312. Members of this committee included the government statistician, three economists, and representatives from the Associated Chambers of Commerce, the Douglas Credit Movement of New Zealand, and the Commonwealth Land Party of New Zealand.

⁴⁴ "Monetary Committee", AJHR, 1934, B3, 312, p.36.

⁴⁵ "Recess Education Committee on Educational Reorganisation in New Zealand", AJHR, 1930, 18A, 302. School principals and members of the New Zealand Women's Teacher's Associations were part of this committee, which consisted predominately of members of parliament and government departments such as Harry Atmore and Peter Fraser.

the committee argued, "was then just dawning".⁴⁶ Despite the somewhat self-congratulatory interpretation, the committee saw some undesirable distinctions remaining in the education system. It proposed a scheme that will make "disappear the last vestige of the objectionable social distinctions which have hitherto tended to divide those who have received a secondary education from those who have not".⁴⁷ The small but substantial recognition is that despite the contemporary objection to social distinctions and ideals of equality, the distinctions had not yet disappeared.

Notions of "community" and egalitarianism tend to dominate specific discussions of hierarchy, inequality, and social distinction in the committee and commission reports. Particularly given the varied personnel and purposes of the reports, this suggests that a classless equal society was a predominant official ideal, if not exactly a pervasive actuality.

Education and Labour Departmental Reports

The reports written by the ministers of education and the heads of the department of labour during the 1930s and 1940s reconfirm the suggestion. The emphasis on the largely classless, egalitarian aspects of the contemporary society seems to have discouraged much discussion of social distinction and inequality.

The 1939 minister of education report,⁴⁸ in which Fraser declared the government's objective in education, appears to be a dramatic exception to this tendency. Broadly expressed, the objective was "that every person, whatever his level of academic ability, whether he be rich or poor...has a right, as a citizen, to a free education of the kind for which he is best fitted, and to the fullest extent of his powers".⁴⁹ The report criticised the exclusiveness of the traditional education system, and connected this with wider socioeconomic inequalities. Schooling "had to be either bought by the well-to-do or won...by the specially brilliant", the report argued, and a "definite

⁴⁶ "Education Committee", AJHR, 1930, I8A, 302, p.9.

⁴⁷ "Education Committee", AJHR, 1930, I8A, 302, p.14.

⁴⁸ Notably, while Fraser gave the speech, C.E. Beeby allegedly wrote it, as he points out in his biography. See: C.E. Beeby, *The Biography of an Idea: Beeby on Education*, Wellington, 1992, p.xvi.

⁴⁹ P. Fraser, "Minister of Education Report" (MER), AJHR, 1939, E1, pp.2-3.

penalty was placed on the children of the poor". Although Fraser maintained that "the rigour of this selective system" has been "progressively relaxed", he claimed that the "present Government was the first to recognise explicitly that continued education is no longer a special privilege...but a right to be claimed by all". The aim for the future was clearly stated: "true equality of opportunity" for "the whole population".⁵⁰ Again, the significant point is that this "equality" had yet to be achieved.

The point was one few previous ministers had cared to make. As Beeby recalls, the report seemed "revolutionary", for it was "the first time any government in New Zealand had ever committed itself absolutely to the idea of full and *free* education for all".⁵¹ Judging by the previous reports, the 1939 report was the first to acknowledge inequality and social distinctions in the traditional, and in some ways contemporary, education system. If inequality and privilege were factors in the education system before 1939, these officials barely admitted them. Harry Atmore's 1931 report does allude to a degree of exclusiveness, in the bland statement that the "time is now past for the community to be satisfied with the narrow academic type of secondary education".⁵² The meaning of "narrow" is either carelessly or intentionally unclear.

Although the now famous report, coming "from the second-ranking minister in the first Labour government, [and] dedicated to social reform after the Great Depression...certainly wasn't trite in 1939",⁵³ it was also not as radical as it seemed. Rather than addressing the issue of inequality of outcomes in education, Fraser is really only talking about remedying inequality of access. The aim is to relate to different needs, which virtually concedes that people do not start equal, at least intellectually. The aim is evident in phrases like "whatever his level of academic ability" or "for which he is best fitted". Equality of outcomes or "results"⁵⁴ is not being promised, for the outcomes are apparently shaped by the different capacities of the students. A paradox is that social mobility through education, or providing equal

⁵⁰ Fraser, "MER", AJHR, 1939, E1, p.3.

⁵¹ Beeby, *Biography*, pp.125-6.

⁵² H. Atmore, "MER", AJHR, 1931, E1, p.2.

⁵³ Beeby, *Biography*, p.xvi.

⁵⁴ Beeby, *Biography*, p.301.

“opportunity” to people of all different abilities, in some ways maintains rather than rectifies a hierarchically ordered society. “True” or total equality was an ideal that Fraser was not actually promising. Illustrated in phrases like “the present Government was the first to recognise”, Fraser was perhaps keener to promote his government and its policies. According to William Renwick, “[e]ven more than the previous governments, the first Labour administration sought to use its agencies of state authority to spearhead its reforms”.⁵⁵

Throughout the 1940s, the inequality “explicitly” recognised in the 1939 report is only ever referred to in muted tones. Maybe this was partly due to wartime stringency. Beeby recalls the instruction “to reduce annual reports to a minimum for the duration of the war”, and maintains that “it became impossible to use these reports as a vehicle for explaining the reasons for the changes we were making in the school system.”⁵⁶ Certainly, there is little explanation of the “reasons” or the “changes” in the educational system. Henry Mason concisely states in his 1947 report that the system now “caters for almost the whole population instead of for a selected group”.⁵⁷ The report did acknowledge that “post-primary education...was originally devised for the specially selected and gifted few”.⁵⁸ Even in this acknowledgement, though, words such as “the rich” and “privilege” have been completely phased out. The sole use of the word “selected” denies connotations of exclusiveness or inequality. Perhaps the changes in the education system stemming from the 1939 “exposé” are seen as so obvious they do not require elaboration. After 1939, for example, the Labour government ended the Proficiency Tests to enable everyone admittance to post-primary education.⁵⁹ Maybe all that is needed by 1947 is a blank statement that “the situation is now totally altered”.⁶⁰ Ultimately, however, there is silence on what exactly had been “altered”, or why the “situation” needed to be altered in the first place.

⁵⁵ W. Renwick, “Foreword”, in C.E. Beeby, *The Biography of an Idea: Beeby on Education*, Wellington, 1992, p.ix.

⁵⁶ Beeby, *Biography*, p.130.

⁵⁷ H.G.R. Mason, “MER”, AJHR, 1947, E1, p.3.

⁵⁸ Mason, “MER”, AJHR, 1947, E1, p.4.

⁵⁹ Beeby, *Biography*, p.289.

⁶⁰ Mason, “MER”, AJHR, 1947, E1, p.4.

The education reports are more concerned with detailing why this "situation" is now so positive. The explanation provided is a largely class-free and socially mobile society. Judging by these reports, it is wrong to speculate that socioeconomic differences are being officially understated in the expounding of egalitarian ideals. New Zealand, according to Mason's 1940 report, is characterised by "its small range of social and economic differences, and, above all, its passionate desire that education beyond the primary level should be shared by all who can benefit from it".⁶¹ The 1947 report described New Zealanders' "natural disinclination to segregate social groups".⁶² At least in these reports, there certainly seems to be a "disinclination to segregate". The general implication is that the education system mirrors the nonexistence of class distinctions in wider society. Every child, Terence McCombs enthused in his 1949 report, is enabled to choose "the type of work he prefers", and then is helped "to find a suitable position" within New Zealand's "modern democratic community".⁶³ Ideally and actually, according to the education reports, only minor social and economic differences are present in the contemporary society.

The labour reports throughout this period also seem to ascribe to this desirable representation. The reports display a tendency to discuss class in similar terms to the *Yearbooks*. The terms "classes of workers",⁶⁴ and "occupational categories"⁶⁵ are frequently used, with no apparent awareness of any conflict or hierarchical distinctions between the "categories". In common with the *Yearbooks*, the reports make a clear distinction between the two main occupational groupings of "workers" and "employers". A 1936 list of newly registered industrial associations and unions illustrates the typical categorisation. A brief idea is given of the members of the major occupational category of "workers", which includes assistants, rural workers, domestic workers, and employees in general.⁶⁶ Included within the other frequently cited

⁶¹ H.G.R. Mason, "MER", AJHR, 1940, E1, p.2.

⁶² Mason, "MER", AJHR, 1947, E1, p.5.

⁶³ T.H. McCombs, "MER", AJHR, 1949, E1, p.2.

⁶⁴ J. O'Brien, "Department of Labour Report" (DLR), AJHR, 1947, H11, p.12.

⁶⁵ H.L. Bockett, "DLR", AJHR, 1949, H11, p.15.

⁶⁶ J.S. Hunter, "DLR", AJHR, 1936, H11, p.13.

occupational category of “employers” are farmers, manufacturers, contractors and traders, merchants, and proprietors.⁶⁷ It appears irrelevant to clarify how these broad and basic distinctions between “employers” and “workers” as “employees” translate into a social arena. This contrasts to the discussion of society and social distinctions in the reports on the education system. Perhaps the heads of the departments of labour were required to objectively restrict their focus to an industrial sphere. Yet even within this sphere, possible subjects such as industrial conflict, occupational status differences, and inequality of income between occupations are hardly broached.

It could be argued that by distinguishing between “employers” and “employees”, a social and economic division is being recognised by the writers of the *Yearbooks* and the departmental labour reports. Traditionally, and particularly according to Marxist theory, the wage relation is one of power, or a distinction between those who own capital and those who do not. Academics and polemicists such as Gilbert Cope and A.E.C. Hare were comparatively very clear about the connotations. Consciously or not, these officials are using a fundamental classification. The question remains over why the distinction is being made, especially given the apparent objective to refrain from using contentious or subjectively derived concepts. The issue is even more interesting given that so many of the academics and polemicists made the same fundamental distinction between “capital” or the “employing class” and “workers”.

Parliamentary Debates and Government Published / Commissioned Reports

In contrast to all the other official sources, more explicit and diverse perceptions of class are evident in the debates and reports. There is frequent acknowledgement, for instance, that social distinctions and inequalities exist, and that class is an important issue. Nevertheless, in keeping with the other officials, a common attitude among all the various politicians examined is that class is undesirable and avoidable. In order to understand the variation and meaning of their class rhetoric, it is useful to make a general distinction between opposition and pro-government politicians. Roughly speaking, two different political parties ruled during this period; United from 1931 to

⁶⁷ Hunter, “DLR”, AJHR, 1936, H11, p.13.

1935, and Labour from 1935 to 1949. The consistent finding is how the politicians' criticism and approval of the social structure appears to be greatly influenced by whether their party was in power.

Joseph Coates, the minister of public works under the United/Forbes Coalition Ministry, wrote a government-published report in 1935 on *Housing in New Zealand*. If the word "class" is ever used in the report, it is in terms of an objective classificatory device. The classes are emphasised as economic or income-based rather than social. Coates is quick to point out that the classifications are only "for convenience's sake". It is "from the point of view of a housing policy", Coates stresses, that "the community may be divided into the following classes".⁶⁸ He distinguishes three classes, from those in "stable employment" but whose "incomes are too low" to become house owners, to those in "less stable employment" whose "incomes are too low" to pay rent at existing costs, and lastly those on "comfortable incomes" but who have "inadequate capital".⁶⁹ The question over whether other classes were existent is unanswered. Housing policy is inclusive only of those with lower or inadequate incomes,⁷⁰ and the class association is explored no further. By implication, the rest of the "community" has ready access to decent housing and is therefore not the focus of government policy. The distinctions are stressed as only those necessary for making policy.

Most other politicians who were part of the United government also tend to keep the discussion of distinctions in the "community" to a minimum. The popular but ambiguous phrase "sections of the community" is perhaps indicative of, or even synonymous with, social and economic divisions. The phrase seems to incorporate both the ideal of the people as an egalitarian or unified "community", tempered with the recognition that the "community" is stratified. In a 1930 debate on a proposed Fund for the Unemployed, William Bodkin specified that "workers" and the "more favoured classes" were part of the "community", but stressed that "every section of the

⁶⁸ J.G. Coates, *Housing in New Zealand: an Outline of Policy*, Wellington, 1935, p.10.

⁶⁹ Coates, p.11.

⁷⁰ Coates, p.11.

community”⁷¹ should contribute to the fund. In the occasional references by United politicians to class in terms of social relationships and consciousness, the belief in an overriding “community” consciousness predominates. The emphasis is apparent in William Veitch’s commendations of a 1930 national committee on unemployment. Veitch acknowledged that the committee “consisted of a number of gentlemen holding responsible positions in various classes of the community”. These “gentlemen”, Veitch explains, “might be expected to take a varied, and, in many cases, opposite view of the very involved problems”.⁷² Yet Veitch congratulated the committee for its “recommendations, arrived at unanimously”, which apparently “met the universal appreciation of...the people of New Zealand”.⁷³ It is “a fine thing”, he concluded, “that we have citizens of that character, citizens who, when they are requested by the government to assume national responsibilities, will cast aside their class differences and personal interests”.⁷⁴ New Zealand, according to these United politicians, was a “community” where a unity of interests overcame possible class conflict.

A harmony of opinion about class is not apparent between members of the different political parties. The ideals of egalitarianism and classlessness are certainly expounded by most politicians during the period. During the early and mid 1930s, however, a number of Labour and non-United politicians also criticise the existence of class conflict and economic inequality in the “community”. The current government is often blamed for failing to acknowledge and remedy the inequality.

The “farming class” is a recurring target of these politicians in the early 1930s. Mabel Howard declared in 1932 that “the destinies of the country are in the hands of the exporting farming class”, which “is running the country at the present time”.⁷⁵ This class is often seen as dichotomously positioned against the “workers”, whose political powerlessness and economic subordination is emphasised by the contrast. As Robert

⁷¹ W.A. Bodkin (Central Otago, National), “Unemployment Bill”, *New Zealand Parliamentary Debates* (NZPD), 18 July 1930, 234, p.420.

⁷² W.A. Veitch (Wanganui, United), “Unemployment”, NZPD, 18 July 1930, 234, p.409.

⁷³ Veitch, “Unemployment”, NZPD, 18 July 1930, 234, p.409.

⁷⁴ Veitch, “Unemployment”, NZPD, 18 July 1930, 234, p.409.

⁷⁵ M.B. Howard (Sydenham, Labour), “Industrial Conciliation and Arbitration Amendment Act”, NZPD, 17 March 1932, 231, p.567.

McKeen stated in 1932, the government had legislated “all in the interest of the farmers...so blinded are they to the fact that there are others in the country besides farmers”, which is one “of the sorriest and saddest things which could be done to the workers”.⁷⁶ Equality for “workers” is a strong theme in the criticism of farmers. The government does “not mind who they crush”, McKeen argues, “so long as they give assistance to the farmers”, and consequently there are “fifty thousand workers who have not got a job”.⁷⁷

“Workers” are much more clearly envisaged in the debates as a distinct social and economic group than in all the other official sources examined. The general attitude is one of benevolence and protectionism, stemming from the perception that workers are powerless. In 1932, the government is criticised by a number of Labour politicians for having “robbed” the “workers” of wages and conditions,⁷⁸ and for “lowering the standard of living...almost to the coolie level”.⁷⁹ Beyond their powerlessness, the main attributed characteristic of workers is their low economic status. This tends to be a shared assumption of both United and Labour politicians, regardless of which party was in power. In a 1940 Labour government conference on economic stabilization, for example, inflation is seen as problematic for the “poorer members of the community” in that “every wage and salary earner finds that the cost of living keeps ahead of his wages”.⁸⁰ In a 1930 debate on unemployment schemes, United politician Bodkin declared that “the workers are the sufferers”.⁸¹ Labour politician Clyde Carr agreed that “the shoe is made to pinch where it fits most tightly – in the case of the working men and women”.⁸² It should be “the responsibility of the Government”, various Labour politicians maintained in 1932, to “look after” this “poorer section of the community”.⁸³

⁷⁶ R. McKeen (Wellington South, Labour), “Industrial”, NZPD, 17 March 1932, 231, p.573.

⁷⁷ McKeen, “Industrial”, NZPD, 17 March 1932, 231, pp.573-74.

⁷⁸ H.T. Armstrong (Christchurch East, Labour), “Industrial”, NZPD, 17 March 1932, 231, p.513.

⁷⁹ R. Semple (Wellington East, Labour), “Industrial”, NZPD, 17 March 1932, 231, p.514.

⁸⁰ Economic Stabilization Conference, *Report of the Economic Stabilization Conference 1940*, Wellington, 1940, p.8.

⁸¹ Bodkin, “Unemployment”, NZPD 18 July 1930, 234, p.424.

⁸² C.L. Carr (Timaru, Labour), “Unemployment”, NZPD, 18 July 1930, 234, p.434.

⁸³ J. O’Brien (Westland, Labour), “Industrial”, NZPD, 17 March 1932, 231, p.566.

In keeping with the academics and polemicists, politicians usually fail to specify to whom the broad category of “workers” refers. Even so, the general assumption of New Zealand as a largely equal community is subtly challenged by the perception of “workers” as a majority section. In 1930, National politician Sidney Holland described workers as “a vastly major portion of the population”, in contrast to the minority of “wealthy people”.⁸⁴ The notion of the wealthy minority or “favoured classes”⁸⁵ serves to highlight the detrimental effects of wealth disparities on the majority. As Labour politician Michael Savage criticised of a proposed 1930 Unemployment Bill; “every person provided for under this Bill will also contribute at a greater rate than the rich people”, the revenue coming “from the bigger families, with larger consumption and smaller incomes”.⁸⁶ Labour politician David McMillan argued that “the people” needed “freedom from crushing taxation”, and suggested that if the Labour “Government takes money from people who would spend it on champagne and fur coats and gives that money to people who would spend it on bicycles and bread, then trade as a whole has not been injured”.⁸⁷ Logically, if “workers” are the majority portion of “the people”, and they are comparatively poor, then economic inequality could be widespread. This may provide a clue as to why official sources such as the *Yearbooks* mostly failed to explain the reasons behind the extensive legislation for the betterment of “workers”. The explanation, at least provided by these Labour politicians, would serve to contradict the impression of widespread equality.

In the mid 1930s and throughout the 1940s, however, the same politicians contradict the notion of an equal conflict-free “community” to a much lesser extent. This surely has much to do with the fact that the Labour party governed the country from 1935 to 1949. Labour’s ideology is plainly expressed in McMillan’s 1938 address on medical services provisions. The “Labour party”, McMillan declared, “believes that we in New Zealand should live together as one large family”, “without any conflict or any class

⁸⁴ S.G. Holland (Christchurch North, National), “Unemployment”, NZPD, 18 July 1930, 234, p.405.

⁸⁵ Bodkin, “Unemployment”, NZPD, 18 July 1930, 234, p.420.

⁸⁶ M.J. Savage (Auckland West, Labour), “Unemployment”, NZPD, 18 July 1930, 234, p.416.

⁸⁷ D.G. McMillan (Dunedin West, Labour), “Address in Reply”, NZPD, 30 June 1938, 251, p.88.

distinction". Any scheme, McMillan continued, "which divides the community up into groups...which differentiates, either consciously or unconsciously, in the mind of the doctor, between his patients, must be foreign to the aspirations and the democratic ideals of this Government". McMillan bluntly concluded that "[w]e visualise our people being treated as patients, not as members of a class", and that "it is the policy of this Government to abolish all class distinction".⁸⁸ The visualisation of future classlessness outshines the recognition that not "all class distinction" had actually been abolished.

Beeby's 1935 government-published report on *The Education of the Adolescent* evidently ascribes to the same belief in the desirability of a largely classless, equal society. Yet his recognition of social distinctions suggests that a gap exists between the aim and the current actuality. Beeby began with stating "that movement between the social classes is relatively easy and frequent", thereby implying a fluid or socially mobile social structure. He also added that it "would be mere humbug to pretend that snobbery does not exist, or that every child has an equal chance in life".⁸⁹ The influence of both these observations is evident in his conclusion that it is "no exaggeration to say that the intelligent child of any New Zealand tradesman and of almost any labourer carries in his schoolbag, if not the marshal's baton or the physician's stethoscope...at least the schoolmaster's chalk or the barrister's brief".⁹⁰

A number of questions are unanswered in Beeby's report. Why is the occupation of marshal or physician acclaimed as an ideal objective? Why are the schoolmaster and barrister seen as the less prestigious or successful occupations? Why and how are different "changes in life" and the existence of snobbery likely to limit tradesmen and labourers? The lack of explanation provided for the assumptions implies a common or shared understanding between readers. Deliberately or unwittingly, Beeby is acknowledging the endurance of hierarchical distinctions in status and occupation. The acknowledgement is implicit in the success story cited by Beeby of a child of a

⁸⁸ McMillan, "Address", NZPD, 30 June 1938, 251, pp.93, 97.

⁸⁹ C.E. Beeby, *The Education of the Adolescent in New Zealand*, Wellington, 1937, p.5.

⁹⁰ Beeby, *Education*, p.5.

labourer working "his" way to a professional "position". As a "professional man", Beeby enthused, the labourer's child "will find himself penalised only slightly for having won his position by merit instead of by parental wealth".⁹¹

Such references to snobbery and status are exceptional in these official sources. The exception of Beeby's report may be explicable given that he was a prominent, high-ranking public servant rather than a Labour politician, and thereby perhaps freer to express personal or slightly controversial ideas.⁹² The egalitarian ideology of Labour politicians seems to have committed them to emphasise, after their party was elected, mainly only the aims and achievements of an equal society. The historiography talks about the Labour government's advancement of "social levelling in a more decisive way" during the late 1930s and throughout the 1940s.⁹³ Certainly, the dominant assumption behind much of the legislation discussed in parliament and the government published reports during this period is the desirability of social levelling. The Pensions Amendment Bill of 1936 is advantageous, according to Robert Wright, because it "would put us all on a level".⁹⁴ In the same way as McMillan, Wright's significant recognition is that New Zealanders are not yet "all on a level". But the emphasis on egalitarian aims "to abolish all class distinction"⁹⁵ obscures, if not eclipses, the recognition of actual class distinction. That itself may have been the official objective of Labour politicians.

Class, Gender, and Race

An overall note must be made about gender and race in relation to all these official representations of class and the "community". As a whole, officials and politicians seem to be more reticent in discussing women and Maori and other ethnic minorities

⁹¹ Beeby, *Education*, p.5.

⁹² From 1934-38, Beeby served as the Director for the New Zealand Council for Educational Research. According to Beeby, the Council insisted "on its complete autonomy and freedom from outside interference". See: Beeby, *Biography*, p.91.

⁹³ See, for example: C. Griffen, "Towards an Urban Social History for New Zealand", *New Zealand Journal of History* (NZJH), 20, 2, (1986), pp.121-2.

⁹⁴ R.A. Wright (Wellington Suburbs, Independent), "Pensions Amendment Bill", NZPD, 3 September 1936, 246, p.820.

⁹⁵ McMillan, "Address", NZPD, 30 June 1938, 251, p.97.

than in talking about class. Other than the specific committee reports on the poor status of domestic workers and maternity assistance for lower-income women, the status of women is ignored. Occasionally the politicians include women in their discussions of social welfare legislation, but the masculine pronoun is prevalent. The gendered "community" image is also coloured. Within the education reports, for example, the maintenance of "Native schooling"⁹⁶ which would exclusively cater for the "Maori community"⁹⁷ is seen as desirable. Generally, Maori are an unspecified part of the European "community", or segregated. Either implication is in keeping with these largely classless and seemingly neutral images of New Zealand society.

Comparison and Contextualisation

Objectively measuring and talking about class is inevitably difficult for any "insider" or society-member, especially given its possible subjective meanings in terms of social relationships and consciousness. In his discussion of 1930s and 1940s social legislation, William Oliver concludes that it "is by no means easy, especially given the current state of research, to guess at the ideology which informed the welfare construction". The "values of politicians, public servants and interest groups", Oliver explains, "have not been explored", and "it is difficult to go beyond the obvious assertion that people of each kind, in the face of recognisable problems, sought remedies".⁹⁸ One can, and must, go beyond guessing. According to Scott, the historian must "question the terms in which any document presents itself and thus ask how it contributes to constructing the 'reality' of the past".⁹⁹

Most of these "official" documents are presented as unbiased, objective reports on the "realities" of 1930s and 1940s New Zealand society. Most convey the picture of a society in which class conflict, status distinctions, and disparities of wealth were minor or irrelevant issues. The term "class" is restricted to making basic, non-contentious classifications in terms of income and occupation. The question remains

⁹⁶ Mason, "MER", AJHR, 1940, E1, p.4.

⁹⁷ Fraser, "MER", AJHR, 1938, E1, p.9.

⁹⁸ Oliver, p.24.

⁹⁹ Scott, p.138.

over the extent to which ideals of classlessness and egalitarianism subjectively shaped these representations.

In examining this question, one needs to take account of the differences in the purposes and personnel of the sources. To paraphrase Scott's findings, the *Yearbooks*, committees and commissions, and departmental labour reports convey the notion that class relationships were only a functional part of the order of economic production.¹⁰⁰ Perhaps this is because the writers of these sources were restricted to providing statistical or factual data rather than social commentary. This ostensible objective therefore makes the one-sided focus of the reports of social welfare legislation in the *Yearbooks* very interesting. The *Yearbooks* concentrate on detailing the government's aims at "equalising" and its provisions for the betterment of "workers". If the reports were aiming to be neutral, surely they should also have provided some data or explanation as for the need to "equalise" and specifically target "workers". In the case of the politicians and government ministers, the official attitude towards discussing class is more obvious. Labour politicians clearly felt free to admit the "natural disinclination" to segregate, and their belief that "dividing the community up into groups...is foreign to the aspirations and democratic ideals of this Government".

In general, these different "officials" may have considered the subject of class, at least in terms of social distinctions, irrelevant or too contentious to warrant much close attention. Looking at the sources as a whole, the reticence, diffidence, or ambiguity with which the politicians and public servants discussed class effectively promotes the picture of a largely equal, classless community. Given that egalitarianism and classlessness are apparently widely held ideals and aims in the contemporary society, the effect is surely not coincidental. The decision by most officials and politicians to focus on egalitarian aims and achievements is hardly value-free. There is an interesting assumption in Beeby's argument that "it is mere humbug to pretend that snobbery does not exist" or Fraser's argument that his "Government was the first to explicitly recognise" the inequality of the education system. An inference is that both

¹⁰⁰ Scott, p.124.

Beeby and Fraser were aware of the contemporary tendency to focus on topics other than class and inequality, even if their existence was recognisable and considered problematic.

Two occurrences, which also directly relate to the sources examined in chapter three, illustrate the official reticence to focus on issues such as class distinction and inequality. One example is the government's refusal to publish William Sutch's apparently polemical work as an official centennial survey. As explored in chapter three, Sutch clearly criticised the existence of social distinctions and economic inequality in areas like education, perhaps thereby breaching the "neutrality" required of a public servant. There is another important example of this official avoidance of, or disinclination to confront, the issue of class. In 1940, the government closed the Bureau of Social Science Research soon after its only research; a survey of dairy farmers' standards of living by William Doig, was published. According to contemporary academics such as Leslie Lipson, the official censoring of controversial subjects was obvious. The Bureau, Lipson argues, was "blocked and frustrated" after the "minister of finance objected to the publication of certain facts, which might, he thought, lend colour to unfavourable political interpretation".¹⁰¹ This raises the issue of what kinds of "facts" were being selected for publication in the *Yearbooks*. James Robb argues that the connection with the publication of Doig's research and the closure of the Bureau is less "direct".¹⁰² Nevertheless, Robb still concludes from the incident that government-sponsored academic research "must be limited in scope and will be in constant danger if it tries to step beyond those limits".¹⁰³ Notably, Doig's critical treatise of differences in general standards of living was published by a left-wing¹⁰⁴ publishing society in 1942. Surely if officials were convinced that their society was classless and conflict-free, any type of social research would be welcome to highlight the achievement. On the contrary, these two examples arguably further

¹⁰¹ L. Lipson, *The Politics of Equality: New Zealand's Adventures in Democracy*, Chicago, 1948, p.392.

¹⁰² J.H. Robb, *The Life and Death of Official Social Research in New Zealand, 1936-1940*, Wellington, 1987, pp.3, 89.

¹⁰³ Robb, p.94.

¹⁰⁴ R. Barrowman, *A Popular Vision: the Arts and the Left in New Zealand, 1930-1950*, Wellington, 1991, pp.6, 230.

reveal the political and official tendency to prioritise the representation of social ideals over social critiques.

It is remarkable how much is being said in not officially saying much about class. Judging by most of these official and political accounts, New Zealand society was largely classless and egalitarian, if not in actuality then at least in aim. To some extent, then, officials and politicians were in agreement with the academics and polemicists about the lack of inequality in their society. Of course, some of the academics and polemicists were likely to have consulted official sources such as the *Yearbooks* for "factual" information in forming their own interpretations. In addition, many of the academic texts, and particularly the centennial publications, were government-commissioned or published. As the government made clear in the case of Sutch's work, it was beneficial for the authors to concentrate on non-contentious subjects. A number of the officials and politicians were likely to be aware of or influenced by inherited rhetoric about class. The fundamental distinction made by most officials between "employee" and "employers" and occasionally interpreted in strong class terms is one example of the influence. A very similar distinction between "capital" and "labour" was made by nearly all the academics and polemicists examined in chapter three. In short, similar subjective and objective influences on academics, officials, polemicists, and politicians may provide an explanation for some of their analogous interpretations. In chapter five, the examination of sources where the expression of personal opinion is paramount reveals some very different attitudes towards inequality and social distinction. Not all contemporaries embraced the traditional notion that New Zealand was, or should be, a land of equal opportunity.

Chapter 5

Personal "Class" Imagery

Introduction and Sources

Chapter five marks a turning point in the study. It signifies the shift in focus from examining highly official and educated views of class to looking at much more personal and unofficial perceptions. Arthur Marwick uses the phrase "private imagery" to refer to his analysis of "private, unpublished, and unofficial" sources such as diaries and letters. He claims that in studying "private class imagery...we get closest to what people without any professional or official axe to grind think about social structure as a whole, and their own position in it".¹ In regards to 1930s and 1940s New Zealand, the limited amount² and accessibility of such sources entails a slightly different focus. The personal sources that are available³ are a range of autobiographies,⁴ reminiscences, and informal social commentaries. Rather than being "private", these are mostly published accounts of individuals reflecting on their experiences and contemporary society.

From the outset, the purposes and potential biases of the chosen texts need critical appraisal. In general, there appear to be two quite different focuses and generational views represented in these texts. The majority of the personal sources

¹A. Marwick, *Class: Image and Reality in Britain, France and the USA Since 1930*, Houndmills, 1990, p.13.

² Even some contemporaries were aware of the dearth of personal diaries, journals, and letters. Few people, Ebenezer Maxwell observed in 1935, "record things unless obliged, and still fewer will record intimate personal affairs, thoughts and opinions". See: E. Maxwell, *Recollections and Reflections of an Old New Zealander*, Dunedin, 1935, p.13.

³ This discovery was made after extensive searches on library databases and catalogues for available "personal" sources. A range of secondary literature was also consulted for possible references to primary sources: A.G. Bagnall, *New Zealand National Bibliography to the Year 1960*, Vols I, II, III, Wellington, 1969; J. Belich, *Paradise Reforged: a History of the New Zealanders From the 1880s to the Year 2000*, Auckland, 2001; R.M. Burdon, *The New Dominion: a Social and Political History of New Zealand, 1918-39*, Wellington, 1965; P.J. Gibbons, "The Climate of Opinion", in W.H. Oliver & B.R. Williams, eds, *The Oxford History of New Zealand*, Auckland, 1981, pp.302-30; P.J. Gibbons, "From National Identity to Post-Colonial Perspectives, 1930s-1990s", in T. Sturm, ed., *The Oxford History of New Zealand Literature in English*, Auckland, 1998, pp.69-93; P.J. Gibbons, "Literary Autobiography and Literary Biography, 1930s-1990s", in T. Sturm, ed., *The Oxford History of New Zealand Literature in English*, Auckland, 1998, pp.94-118; E.H. McCormick, *Letters and Art in New Zealand*, Wellington, 1940; G.H. Scholefield, *A Dictionary of New Zealand Biography*, Vols 1-2, Wellington, 1940.

⁴ Autobiographies about this period but written later cannot be included, given that they could be influenced by later assumptions and languages of "class".

are the largely retrospective and autobiographical accounts. Most of these are written by self-described “pioneers”, an older generation whose views are shaped by earlier experiences. The other type of “personal source” is the informal and largely urban social commentaries and critiques of the contemporary society. If only because of their much stronger “recent” or “current” focus, this smaller group of personal authors is loosely termed the “younger generation” in this chapter. A number of informal writers including Paul Simpson, Aldwyn Abberley, journalist Robin Hyde,⁵ rural doctor George Smith, “farmer’s wife” Anne Brown, and University student R.S. Gormack are part of this younger generation. Notably, the lack of clear biographical detail forces the inference or suggestion of only broad or arbitrary source distinctions.

The need for this categorisation becomes apparent in looking at the main themes of the sources. There are some interesting correlations and differences in these contemporary images of the past and present. The first theme relates to the comparatively weaker expression throughout all the personal sources of assumptions of classlessness, egalitarianism, and the need to elevate “workers”. As previously examined, these assumptions were strongly held by many of the academics, polemicists, officials, and politicians. Economic inequality, the privileged and wealthy members of society, and social distinctions and snobbery were emphasised as peripheral problems. Although to a noticeably lesser extent, most of the urban social commentaries and some of the pioneers tend to ascribe to a similar view of New Zealand’s past and present. The pioneers recollect how New Zealanders in the past worked together as a largely harmonious community, and how opportunities for upward social mobility were available for the industrious. The younger social commentators emphasise a commonality of lifestyles and social equality. Incorporated in the idea of community is the notion of a dominant “middle-class” or average majority. The implication is that New Zealand society, both before and during the 1930s and 1940s, was a largely egalitarian community.

Nonetheless, both types of personal social commentators also often recognise and criticise current social distinctions. The pioneers make a number of comparisons

⁵ Although R. Hyde was also a fictional writer, her autobiographical *Journalese* focuses on her time as a journalist during the early 1930s.

with the ideals of the past and the problems of the present. Chief among these problems are the indolence of “workers” and the unfairness for the wealthy of the government’s “levelling” social welfare legislation. This is where their views depart from the views of the younger generation. If the latter commentators ever observe disparities of wealth and social distinctions, the importance of egalitarianism is stressed. In contrast, a number of the pioneers even assert that a degree of hierarchy and inequality is desirable, which relates to the second main theme. Anti-egalitarian rhetoric or at least antagonism towards social levelling is surprisingly noticeable in the pioneers’ critiques of contemporary society. Although a minor focus, “workers” appear to be the vices in the pioneers’ positive portrayals of wealth and privilege. A contention of this thesis is that the pioneer accounts may implicitly reflect the bias of an unrepresentative, even elitist focus.

The third main theme relates to the assumptions behind the rhetoric of the personal sources. Once again, the term “class” is only occasionally used. There are different contemporary criteria in these sources for perceiving and portraying social distinctions from the criteria examined in earlier chapters. Although subtly emphasised, there is a strong moral or cultural content in the distinguishing of lifestyles and status, which is seemingly unrelated to income levels and occupational categories. In particular, the pioneers place a premium on respectability and being “cultured”. Such attributes are vaguely defined as personal moral qualities that can ostensibly be earned or achieved by anyone. Yet a problem exists in the tendency to use moral distinctions to make oblique rather than horizontal characterisations of different individuals and social groups. Interestingly also, physical or aesthetic criteria are used to make hierarchical social distinctions between contemporaries. Financially and socially successful members of society are apparently inherently more attractive and respectable than “workers”. In effect, this argument serves to legitimate their higher social and economic position over lower-ranked “workers” both prior to and during the 1930s and 1940s. Intrinsic equality is an ideal to which many of these personal writers evidently did not subscribe.

Egalitarianism, Community, and the "Middle-Class"

Starting at the beginning, or the retrospective images of early European settlement during the nineteenth-century, one can then trace the shifts and comparisons in perceptions of 1930s and 1940s New Zealand society. The main themes in the images of early New Zealand society are egalitarianism and social mobility.

Miles Fairburn has explored the European "insider's view" or stereotype of early New Zealand as a male "Labourer's Paradise": "a place where men without capital or from humble origins could become proprietors after only a few years in the colony".⁶ This inherited notion is detectable in many of the autobiographical accounts and reminiscences. Even the very title of William Howitt's autobiography, *A Pioneer Looks Back Again: a Story of Fortitude, Courage and Achievement*, illustrates the typical emphasis. William Ayson recalls the humble beginnings of his farming "estate" that he established "in 1891, there being no farm or homestead there previously". Ayson's autobiography traces the story of how, through hard work and enterprise, the estate grew to "700 acres and about 1,300 sheep" by the 1930s.⁷ In the preface to Edmund Smith's *Early Adventures in Otago*, William Stewart notes how the "reader can hardly fail to be astonished at Mr. Smith's remarkable success as a business man when he reads the narrative of his early hardships, which offered so little by way of training for such great responsibilities". It was only "after passing through many hardships", Stewart stresses, that Smith "became one of our most prominent and respected citizens".⁸ By implication, the moral attributes of industriousness and fortitude brought such pioneers their "remarkable success".

These kinds of assumptions are not unique to the 1930s and 1940s. The vision of an ideal society was initially promoted to prospective settlers in the nineteenth-century, and became part of early settler ideology about the New World. New Zealand, David Hamer explains, "was depicted as a place where 'getting on in life' was the result not of inherited privilege or of the class into which one was born but

⁶ M. Fairburn, *The Ideal Society and its Enemies: the Foundations of Modern New Zealand Society, 1850-1900*, Auckland, 1989, p.42.

⁷ W. Ayson, *Pioneering in Otago: the Recollections of William Ayson, Set Down in his 97th Year*, Dunedin, 1937, p.107.

⁸ W. Stewart, "Preface", in E. Smith, *Early Adventures in Otago*, Dunedin, 1940, pp.7-10.

of the possession and exercise of certain moral qualities such as industriousness". The ideal was that New Zealand "was free of those rigid class divisions which in the Old World prevented men from improving their condition in life". Yet as Hamer notes, a society "which maximises opportunities for one to 'get on in life' is not one that will be free of social gradations or even classes". A hierarchy will exist, as he explains, "but the difference between it and the social structure condemned in the 'Old World' is that movement up and down it will be determined by application of these qualities and not inhibited or obstructed by the rigidity of the barriers between class".⁹

A similar belief in New Zealand prior to the 1930s and 1940s as a distinctively open but stratified society is evident in many of the pioneers' reminiscences. When any social distinctions are recalled, they are often accompanied by an emphasis on harmony, community, and social mobility. In *Brave Days*, a collection of stories of early pioneer women, the emphasis is repeatedly on the feeling of "camaraderie" between one's "fellow-emigrants, of whatever class".¹⁰ Pioneer Ebenezer Maxwell recalls that social "distinctions in no way inferred lack of friendly feeling and goodwill between each and all...nor did it, as events have provided, infer or raise any bar to gradual alteration of status".¹¹ In "its earlier social conditions", Maxwell concludes, "this new land was a happy and mutually respecting community".¹² Despite chronological distance, nineteenth-century beliefs about class are very nearly the same as those displayed in the 1930s and 1940s pioneers' retrospective accounts. The endurance of traditional egalitarian rhetoric is evident.

Most of the urban social commentators and a number of the pioneers emphasise the continued existence in the 1930s and 1940s of the socially mobile, egalitarian characteristics of early New Zealand society. Nowadays, Ebenezer Maxwell asserted, "all degrees are nominally so blended that no clear line can be drawn".¹³ Notions of superiority and inferiority are allegedly foreign. Journalist John Mulgan

⁹ D. Hamer, *The New Zealand Liberals: the Years of Power, 1891-1912*, Auckland, 1988, p.52. See also: Fairburn, pp.51-52.

¹⁰ Federated Farmers of N.Z. Women's Division (WDFFNZ), *Brave Days: Pioneer Women of New Zealand*, Dunedin, 1939, p.15.

¹¹ E. Maxwell, p.22.

¹² E. Maxwell, p.22.

¹³ E. Maxwell, p.22.

stressed how New Zealand soldiers “hate” the “accent of superiority and patronage” of the British officers.¹⁴ Informal social commentator Abberley congratulated the egalitarian wheels set in motion by the advent of the bicycle. “Everybody rides”, Abberley enthused about Christchurch, “from bank manager to office boy, from society woman to bishop...cyclists of all sorts and degrees”, and consequently “[c]lass distinctions have been almost eliminated in this democratic city”.¹⁵ Rural doctor Smith envisaged that the “new medical service should be 100% service; everyone in it...the rich and the poor receiving the same”. It is “no good taking from those who have and giving to those who have not”, Smith argued, “when there is plenty for everyone”.¹⁶ According to Ewen Alison, “we have few rich men” and “our wealth is pretty evenly divided”.¹⁷ At least for the younger social commentators the emphasis on social equality tends to overshadow any admission of economic inequality.

One explanation given by these writers for the seeming lack of inequality and distinctions in the 1930s and 1940s relates to the belief that New Zealand’s population originated from the “middle-class”. Howitt asserts, for example, that New Zealand’s pioneers were largely “sons of the great middle-class of British society” who “have given to us those traits of steadiness and reserve upon which true national characteristics are built”.¹⁸ Ebenezer Maxwell also argues that the majority of New Zealand’s pioneers were of genteel origins. Whilst the pioneers “consisted of all classes”, Maxwell argued, “an extraordinarily high proportion consisted of those of culture and high attainments and special ability”.¹⁹ This suggests that the approved moral attributes of the successful pioneers, such as industry, were particular traits of the “middle-class”. Another implication is that the members and “national characteristics” of 1930s and 1940s New Zealand society had a predominantly “middle-class” or genteel heritage. Possibly, “no clear line can be drawn”²⁰ because the majority of the contemporary population are

¹⁴ J. Mulgan, *Report on Experience*, London, 1947, p.48.

¹⁵ A. Abberley, *Chase me a Kiwi: a Portrait of New Zealand*, Malvern, 1946, pp.23-24.

¹⁶ G.M. Smith, *Notes From a Backblock Hospital*, Christchurch, 1938, p.35.

¹⁷ E.W. Alison, *A New Zealander Sees the World*, Auckland, 1937, p.37.

¹⁸ W.K. Howitt, *A Pioneer Looks Back Again: a Story of Fortitude, Courage and Achievement*, Auckland, 1947, p.168.

¹⁹ E. Maxwell, p.192.

²⁰ E. Maxwell, p.22.

neither rich nor poor but somewhere in the "middle".

The influence of traditional British characterisations and commendations of the "middle-class" resonates in such assumptions. There are numerous examples in nineteenth-century British literature of the notion that the "great middle-class" exhibited all the characteristics for self-improvement and success. In 1859, for example, British writer Samuel Smiles published an enormously popular book titled *Self-Help*, which consisted of "a series of potted biographies of men who had risen by their own efforts from obscurity to wealth and influence".²¹ The "self-made man" is nearly always assumed to be "middle-class". "National progress", Smiles claimed, "is the sum of individual industry, energy, and uprightness, as national decay is of individual idleness, selfishness, and vice". According to Smiles, "there has never been in any former age as much of these virtues as is now to be found amongst the great middle class of our community...that class which is in between the privileged class, the richest, and the very poorest".²² Smiles' argument is remarkably similar to assumptions about the "middle-class" and their virtues made by pioneers during the 1930s and 1940s. According to these accounts, the New World replicated some of the rhetoric if not the social structure of the Old.

The term "middle-class" is apparently less relevant for the younger social commentators. Yet the assumption of a "middle" or "average" majority, positioned in between the richest and the very poorest, is persistent. Informal writer Paul Simpson agrees that there are "very many wealthy people who live accordingly" and a very small amount of "extreme poverty of the overcrowded shack type". Yet in his opinion the people who are "average" or "representative" are the "great bulk of suburban and small-town people" who "live in comfortable, convenient houses".²³ These people, he stresses, should not be "mistakenly described as the 'middle class'", for "it is impossible to determine where the 'middle' class begins or where it ends". Simpson points to the problem of deciding what "makes a man 'middle' class", and whether it should be based on such markers as "his bank book,

²¹ According to John Harrison, "Samuel Smiles was the most popular of many authors of a success literature which elevated the self-made man into an almost mystical figure in Victorian England....*Self-Help* was published in 1859 and sold a quarter of a million copies". See: J.F.C. Harrison, *Society and Politics in England, 1780-1960: a Selection of Readings and Comments*, New York, 1965, pp.211-21.

²² S. Smiles, *Self-Help*, 1859, cit., Harrison, pp.211-14.

²³ P.H. Simpson, *If You'd Care to Know: Non-Fiction*, Auckland, 1946, pp.131-2.

his job, his education, [or] his ancestry".²⁴ He concludes that the "average family" belongs "not to the upper, the middle, nor the lower 'class' ", and "comprise a simple household, living according to the circumstances that shape their existence".²⁵ Clearly Simpson is struggling to see the relevance in the local context of inherited class terms such as "middle-class". Other similar social commentators rarely use the term "middle-class". Contemporary pioneers might argue the importance of a "middle-class" heritage, but members of the younger generation apparently did not find the traditional class rhetoric applicable.

Anti-Egalitarianism and "Workers"

Then again, in regards to contemporary society, members of the older generation often reject the traditional egalitarian rhetoric that the younger social commentators seem to find highly applicable. "We are not all equal and never will be", pioneer Edgar Jones observed without regret. His imagery of a dichotomy between the "masses" and those with wealth and power is uncritical of inequality. In politics, Jones argued, "surely the educated, the clever Scientist, and those who have a big stake in their country should have more votes than the weakling".²⁶ The pioneers invert previously examined representations of the minority unfairly taking from the majority. According to Jones, if "you give those who have nothing, power over those who have, it is, in my opinion, only to be expected, that some day they will use that power to bring all to the same level".²⁷ Jones evidently perceives this "levelling" process between the "haves" and "have nots"²⁸ as negative. Ebenezer Maxwell also argued that workers should ideally know their lower place, as they did in early settlement. There was no sense then, he recalls, "in the saying 'Jack's as good as his master'", for in many ways he was not, nor did he think he was, nor did he ever conceive that he was wrongly placed".²⁹

A unique reaction to the government's social welfare legislation, at least in relation to the sources discussed in the previous two chapters, is evident in these autobiographies and reminiscences. Rather than arguing for the protection of

²⁴ Simpson, p.132.

²⁵ Simpson, p.151.

²⁶ E. Jones, *Autobiography of an Early Settler in New Zealand*, Wellington, 1933, p.67.

²⁷ Jones, pp.68-69.

²⁸ Jones, pp.67-68.

²⁹ E. Maxwell, p.23.

workers, the plea is for the government's protection of the wealthy. Jones suggests that to improve "our present civilisation, not by any methods to favour one class at the expense of the other, but to help all", the government needs to protect those "who have made wealth honestly".³⁰ In his opinion, too "much of our legislation to-day is at the instigation of Labour legislators, quite forgetting that they take too much from the rich (who pay most of the taxes)".³¹ Those who argue the need to "Give us State aid", Howitt also dismissively argues, are "the shiftless and thriftless".³² Wealthy people, who were so strongly criticised for the suffering of workers by a number of academics, politicians, and polemicists, are seemingly themselves the sufferers. Given the extreme rarity of this view in all the previously examined sources, the pioneers' reaction to current trends may be unrepresentative of the contemporary tide of opinion in favour of social "levelling".

Certainly, the pioneers' assumptions about workers appear to be vastly different from the characterisation of workers discussed in the last two chapters. The minor or peripheral focus on workers in most of the autobiographies and reminiscences is one very noticeable divergence. Again, though, if "workers" are ever discussed, the meaning of this broad category is usually unspecified. Some of the older generation talk about workers as wage earners, while others refer to workers more broadly as employees. The term "working-classes" is also used. Interestingly, the emphasis is on the plurality of "classes", and these classes are never separately discussed. Perhaps the plural is intended to give the impression of the size and dominance of workers: of the threat to the minority of the "masses".³³

Overall, the characterisation of workers in the autobiographies and reminiscences examined is negative. Cultural or moral critiques are made of this social or occupational category. Two very commonly attributed characteristics of workers are indolence and selfishness. While any member of society can ostensibly display these qualities, they tend to be exclusively associated with workers. A typical assumption found in these sources is that favourable legislation had made life too easy for workers. Alison observes that "to-day it is still said that our working men

³⁰ Jones, pp.179-80.

³¹ Jones, p.86.

³² Howitt, p.8.

³³ Jones, p.67.

take it easy". He makes a facetious apology for "our working classes", explaining that the "atmosphere...tends to make people sluggish and slow moving".³⁴ The former qualities of "industry, energy, determination, and reliance on their own qualities" of the "wage-earners", Ebenezer Maxwell claims, have been replaced by "indolence, selfish desire for luxury and ease...and by discontent and antagonism in relation to the rest of the community".³⁵ The negative image of contemporary workers is accentuated by the unfavourable contrast with workers in early European settlement. Eliot Davis bemoans that then there "was more of the spirit of give and take, and as a consequence...the relationship between employer and employee was far more human than it is now".³⁶ The fundamental positive characteristic of "workers" revealed in the previous two chapters was that they were hardworking. Comparatively speaking, the accusation of their indolence is severe.

Even the younger social commentators who mention "workers" tend to make unfavourable distinctions. "Farmer's wife" Brown points out that for some youth, to "leave the grind of lessons and become a wage earner, seems so attractive", yet urges that "the way they would walk is no high road to fortune, but just a blind alley leading to disappointment". Instead, she maintains, fortune and a higher status accrue to occupations such as farming, where one can be "secure in their position".³⁷ The assumption is that in securing social improvement and status, one should avoid the occupation of a wage earner. University student Gormack provides a more dramatically negative image of workers. A diary entry in 1939 describes how "workers are of the night to me. (In the daylight I am repelled by them. I have a great pity for them in the night)". The "drab brick walls, dirty windows, gloomy machinery, [and] dingy cottages holding their darkness", Gormack adds, are "blended into my conception of workers". His conclusion is that workers have "[s]hameless lives".³⁸ The image could hardly be more vivid: the lifestyles and status of "workers" are repellent.

³⁴ Alison, *Sees the World*, p.36.

³⁵ E. Maxwell, p.211.

³⁶ E.R. Davis, *A Link With the Past*, Auckland, 1948, p.92.

³⁷ A.E. Brown, *The Farmer's Wife: a Country Woman's Calendar*, Auckland, 1939, p.135.

³⁸ R.S. Gormack, *Diary Beginnings, 1939*, Christchurch, 1990, pp.9-10.

The repeated association of the moral attributes of indolence and selfishness with “workers” is particularly interesting given that there is apparently no felt need to provide much accompanying justification. By implication, the characterisation was a given in the eyes of the writers and their intended audience. This indicates how the writers did not consider “workers”, who surely might object to the characterisation, as part of their audience. If one takes into account the official, academic, polemical, and political assumptions about “workers”, then these contemporaries are possibly criticising and alienating a majority of the population. According to the previously examined sources, the tide of contemporary opinion was in favour of the social and economic advancement of workers. These personal views about workers are possibly not, therefore, aimed at the general reading public.

The differences between the personal sources and the findings of the previous two chapters are better understood by taking note of the brand of egalitarianism being embraced. As outlined in chapter two, H.G. Oxley distinguishes two types of egalitarianism; intrinsic equality and open competition. Officials and some of the academics tended to recognise and argue about the reality of, or need for, the former type. This stresses the essential sameness of winners and losers and in effect “demands that the more and less able be unequally protected and unequally restricted”.³⁹ The illustrations are numerous: arguments in favour of protecting workers and restricting the privileges of the “exploiting” or “capitalist” class, anti-snobbery rhetoric, and claims that society was free of social distinctions and even homogenous. As Oxley points out, the belief in intrinsic equality is offset by images of open competition, where the doctrine of equal opportunity is “only meaningful in the context of unequal rewards”. This doctrine was also subtly displayed throughout the last two sets of sources examined. The minister of education’s 1939 report, for example, focused on ensuring that everyone “raced from the same starting point”.⁴⁰ The two forms of egalitarianism “coexist under the same banner of equality”, Oxley concludes, “because of their common opposition

³⁹ H.G. Oxley, *Mateship in Local Organisation: a Study of Egalitarianism, Stratification, Leadership, and Amenities Projects in a Semi-Industrial Community in Inland New South Wales*, St Lucia, 1974, p.45.

⁴⁰ Oxley, p.45.

to inherited privilege".⁴¹ The interesting observation about the pioneers is that they actually recognise popular and political egalitarian rhetoric or the current advocacy of intrinsic equality. Regardless of the recognition, the brand of equality they advocate is openly competitive and highly tolerant of unequal rewards and "winners". For many of the pioneers, the only real problem lay in the government's attempts to remedy inequality of outcomes by providing for "workers".

The Rhetoric of Respectability and Social Hierarchy

So far in this chapter, two broad themes in the personal sources have been traced. The first is the assumption that New Zealand was socially mobile and egalitarian. The second is the undermining of this assumption through the recognition of social distinctions and inequality. There are a number of variations in these themes arising from the differences between younger and older generational views, or between retrospective and more contemporary images. In more closely examining the rhetoric used and the kinds of social distinctions made, one gains a deeper insight into the broad themes and variations.

While social distinctions are often perceived, the term "class" is unpopular amongst the older and younger generations. Ebenezer Maxwell observes how the term "class" is out of fashion in the 1930s and 1940s. In describing the "social compound obtaining to-day", he begins to talk about "classes", but corrects himself and notes how "perhaps 'grades' would be a more acceptable term in these times".⁴² Ostensibly, these contemporaries do not see clear economic distinctions in terms of marked inequalities but moral distinctions in terms of lifestyles and character. In general, the criteria for social distinction seem to be respectability and refinement, rather than income or occupation. The terms "cultured" and "vulgar" are often used to distinguish or "grade" members of society. The consistent association of these moral attributes with certain social groupings demonstrates the assumptions behind the rhetoric of social hierarchy. One example already discussed is the tendency to attribute the characteristics of indolence and selfishness exclusively to workers. In general, while only a few of the younger social commentators make such direct or consistent connections, the tendency is

⁴¹ Oxley, p.45.

⁴² E. Maxwell, p.22.

predominant in the older generation's accounts.

The pioneers tend to use the term "vulgar", for instance, solely in relation to their characterisations of "workers" or "labourers". Edmund Smith, an educated pioneer who represents himself as "cultured", describes a "labouring man" who "proved to be a low, vulgar fellow".⁴³ Smith's pioneering adventures are often troubled by having to deal with these lower types. He stayed with a labourer's family whom he describes as "low, vulgar people", and notes how "the wife seemed to take a delight in annoying me because she chose to consider that I had been brought up in a superior way to herself".⁴⁴ Although the image is retrospective, the implicit assumption is that contemporary readers will understand the undefined meaning and unexplained ascription of the term "vulgar". In general, no further explanation usually accompanies the association of vulgarity with workers. Even the use of the term "low", though, gives the impression of a social hierarchy in which workers were poorly positioned.

In their discussions of early European settlement and the present society, the older generation tend to attribute the moral distinction of "cultured" only to the educated, wealthy, or socially prestigious. On one hand, the vaguely defined term "cultured" seems to be a general, inclusive reference to high status and respectability. On the other hand, "cultured" refers to a specific social group to which high status is usually ascribed. The association is clear in Ebenezer Maxwell's discussion of the social gradients in early settlement New Zealand. He distinguishes three "grades"; "the cultured and those of breeding", "trade", and "the wage earners".⁴⁵ The first grade, according to Maxwell, "consisted of those of culture and high attainments, and special ability".⁴⁶ His uncle and aunt are presented as typical members of this cultured "grade". They are respectively described as "distinguished", "a man of exceptional ability and culture", and a woman "with natural and unassuming dignity".⁴⁷

⁴³ E. Smith, *Early Adventures in Otago*, Dunedin, 1940, p.50.

⁴⁴ E. Smith, p.45.

⁴⁵ E. Maxwell, p.22.

⁴⁶ E. Maxwell, p.192.

⁴⁷ E. Maxwell, p.52.

Occasionally the autobiographies and reminiscences directly connect the attribute of “cultured” with the wealthy. Alison remarked how on meeting two “very cultured and refined” ladies, he “felt sure that they belonged to well-to-do families.”⁴⁸ Colonel Charles Brereton describes his neighbours who “were much better off than other settlers”, and who “gave us a pleasant glimpse of cultured life”.⁴⁹ Usually, the grounds on which the “cultured” are elevated are unsupported by explanation, but apparently established by recognition and admiration. Of course, if one connects the claims that the bulk of the early settlers were “cultured”⁵⁰ and came from the British “middle-class”,⁵¹ then “cultured” could be a contemporary proxy term for the middle-class or grade. Ultimately, because the terms “cultured” and “middle-class” tend to be ambiguously used, it is difficult to be conclusive about any perceived connection.

In a society that apparently offered equality of opportunity and was socially mobile, the moral attributes of “cultured” and “vulgar” can be presumably earned by anyone. Why is it, therefore, that explanation is never provided for how these attributes were earned by the individuals and social groups to which they are specifically ascribed? How did “workers” behave to earn the title of “low and vulgar”? What “special ability” did the more “distinguished” or “better off” members of society display in order to gain the commendation of “cultured”? For the pioneers, an assumption of the natural or inherent qualities of certain social “grades” seems to have informed the distinction-making. To paraphrase Pierre Bourdieu, the titles “cultured” and “vulgar” appear to be particular cases of “the attribution by status, whether positive (ennobling) or negative (stigmatising)” to hierarchically ordered strata.⁵²

The stigmatisation of “workers” as indolent and self-serving is similar to the depiction of the “working-class” in nineteenth-century British literature. In 1859, as outlined earlier, British writer Samuel Smiles contrasted the virtues of the

⁴⁸ Alison, *Sees the World*, p.141.

⁴⁹ C.B. Brereton, *No Roll of Drums*, Wellington, 1947, pp.66-67.

⁵⁰ E. Maxwell, p.192.

⁵¹ Howitt, p.168.

⁵² P. Bourdieu, *Distinction: a Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, Cambridge, 1984, p.23.

"middle-class" with the vices of "individual idleness" and "selfishness".⁵³ According to John Harrison, Smiles' aim was to preach "the gospel of self-help...as a practical method of working-class improvement".⁵⁴ The overseas rhetoric about "middle-class virtues" and implicitly "working-class vices" is similar to the pioneers' depictions of "workers" and the "cultured". Interestingly, an assumption made by a number of the younger and older generations is that in the pursuit of social or economic improvement the occupation and status of "worker" should be avoided. The importance placed on moral distinctions such as "cultured" arguably also partly emanates from nineteenth-century British rhetoric regarding respectability. Respectability, according to Geoffrey Best, was "the great Victorian shibboleth and criterion...the sharpest of all lines of social division", which "signified at one and the same time intrinsic virtue and social value".⁵⁵ Traditional British moral distinctions and class stereotypes seem to have persisted in the New World.

The Aesthetics of Social Distinction

In the local context, moreover, assumptions about the "intrinsic virtue and social value"⁵⁶ of certain social grades are often based on physical or aesthetic distinctions. Social distinctions are literally embodied. A common thread running through both types of personal sources is the belief that appearance and physique are markers of status, respectability, and lifestyle.

Both types of social commentators make some direct connections between prestige and clothing. While not necessarily causal, the connections between respectable appearance and high status are at any rate associational. Alison describes how the distinguished clothing of Auckland lawyers in early settlement New Zealand was "part of their stock-in-trade and denoted they were engaged in professional work".⁵⁷ He adds that all these lawyers "did well financially".⁵⁸ A woman in *Tales of Pioneer Women* remembers how the head constable in her town was "well aware of his importance, and took care to impress it on the community by the distinction

⁵³ Smiles, cit. Harrison, pp.211-13.

⁵⁴ Harrison, pp.211-13.

⁵⁵ G. Best, *Mid-Victorian Britain, 1851-1875*, Herts, 1973, pp.282-4.

⁵⁶ Best, pp.282-4.

⁵⁷ E.W. Alison, *A New Zealander Looks on*, Auckland, 1939, p.24.

⁵⁸ Alison, *Looks on*, p.27.

of his appearance".⁵⁹ Detective Charles Belton expressed his concerns about how the police profession in the 1930s was not of a "decent social standing". He was convinced that by introducing "an entirely new and smart style of uniform", a "great improvement in general appearance and consequently prestige" would be made.⁶⁰ Clothing seems to provide an avenue to social betterment, an opportunity for social mobility and attaining respectability.

Yet clothing does not simply make the superior "image". Better appearance or status is subtly ascribed and unattainable for many. There is a latent assumption particularly in the autobiographies and reminiscences that stature or body size varies according to where an individual is positioned in the social hierarchy. According to these contemporaries, those who are "cultured" and wealthy are also naturally strong and attractive, while "workers" are inherently small. Implicitly, the social distinctions based on ascribed physical appearance are gendered, and there is little mention of the physical attributes of Maori.

On one hand, the men who are highly-ranked in the social hierarchy are repeatedly, and perhaps unconsciously, represented as extremely tall and strong. This is especially evident in descriptions of financially or socially successful pioneers. Brereton describes "a successful pioneer" as a "well-built man, over six feet, with a big golden beard [and]...an acute business brain".⁶¹ Another pioneer, Tom Grooby, is described by Brereton as "a fine specimen of an English gentleman, a big upstanding man, gentle, unselfish, loveable, [and] a hardy bushman".⁶² The typical image illustrates the often god-like proportions attributed to the wealthy or prestigious. When Grooby was introduced to a local Bishop, Brereton notes how they "immediately each felt the mutual attraction of the other", for they "were both physically big and men of importance and culture".⁶³ The connection between "cultured" and the ideal male appearance is intimate. It is evident in pioneer William Skinner's description of the four "stalwart sons" of Captain Thomas and

⁵⁹ O. Iorns, "Masterton: the First Store, and the Earthquake of 1855", in A.E. Woodhouse, ed., *Tales of Pioneer Women*, Auckland, 1940, pp.116-17.

⁶⁰ C. Belton, *Outside the Law in New Zealand: Leaves From a Detective's Notebook*, Gisborne, 1939, p.232.

⁶¹ Brereton, pp.64-65.

⁶² Brereton, p.170.

⁶³ Brereton, p.170.

the “privilege” of visiting this pioneer farmer’s “home of charm and culture”. These sons, Skinner states, were “perfect specimens of physical development” and were “expert in bushcraft, horsemanship, and all the activities of pioneering life”.⁶⁴ The physical strength and skill of the “cultured” male enhances his grading as the “perfect specimen”.

On the other hand, cultured and wealthy women are typically represented as highly attractive due to their petite and delicate appearances. Ebenezer Maxwell compliments his “cultured” pioneer aunt for her “handsome and fine carriage”.⁶⁵ A “cultured woman” is admired in *Brave Days* for her “slight” and “attractive” figure.⁶⁶ Similarly, Evelyn Godley describes the “ideal” “gentleness” and “grace” of her wealthy pioneer grandmother, who was “by birth and upbringing, essentially an early-Victorian”. Godley argues that her grandmother did little work for fear of “spoiling her...very good hands”, but that “the civilising effect of her personality was of more service”.⁶⁷ There are evidently gendered ideals in the physical descriptions of the “cultured” and the wealthy members of society. The aesthetically pleasing male is hardworking, statuesque, and cultured, while the desirable female is passive, delicate and cultured. The authors of these personal texts must have assumed that the physical stereotypes and the associated rhetoric of gentility and “culture” had contemporary resonance.

The biological superiority of the “cultured” and wealthy is made further apparent by the contrasting representation of the inferior appearances of “workers”. There is much less description of the clothing and appearance of these people, and virtually none of women. No doubt this is due to the overall minor focus on “workers” throughout the personal sources examined. Nevertheless, the assumption that male workers are small or short occurs too often to be coincidence. Noticeably, a number of the younger generation make a direct connection between smaller physique and “workers”. A chimney sweep is referred to by Brown as “the little

⁶⁴ W.H. Skinner, *Reminiscences of a Taranaki Surveyor*, New Plymouth, 1946, pp.52-53.

⁶⁵ E. Maxwell, p.52.

⁶⁶ WDFNZ, p.254.

⁶⁷ E. Godley, “Charlotte Godley: an Impression”, in C. Godley, *Letters From Early New Zealand*, Plymouth, 1936, p.xvi.

man".⁶⁸ Harman Reeves also describes his window-cleaner as "a little man".⁶⁹ Whether this is a strictly physical description, or an insinuation of the small status of workers, is unexplained. An assumption about the degeneracy of the "little man" or worker is sometimes clear in these sources. Pioneer Brenda Guthrie flatteringly depicts the superior, respectable attributes of the early English colonists. These colonists' "fashionable" appearances, she notes, sparked "good-natured" teasing from "some of the rougher class...whose usual attire was blue shirts, coarse trousers and heavy boots".⁷⁰ Nevertheless, according to Guthrie, the colonists were "superior youths", who gazed "with infinite scorn upon such badly dressed people" and soon triumphed by becoming "the finest colonists".⁷¹ In the area of appearance, and in regards both to early European settlement and 1930s and 1940s society, workers are again unflatteringly visualised. The implicit assumption is that "culture" and physical attractiveness cannot easily be obtained by the "rougher class" of "workers". According to these sources, the "cultured" and wealthy members of society have a naturally superior advantage in the pursuit of social prestige. Indeed, as Ebenezer Maxwell claims, perhaps there was "no sense in the saying 'Jack's as good as his master', for in many ways he was not".⁷²

Historians such as Phillippa Mein-Smith and Jock Phillips have examined traditional assumptions of the physical superiority of New Zealanders. Phillips specifically discusses the attributes that "came to define the ideal New Zealand male",⁷³ which stemmed from the physical characteristics of "the heroic pioneer", who was "tall – over six feet – wiry and strong", intelligent, and "manly".⁷⁴ A very similar image is reflected in contemporary depictions of the physically "perfect specimen". Mein-Smith and Phillips point to the gendering and whitening of the traditional ideal of New Zealand's "superior race" as a largely European male "race".⁷⁵ The interesting point about many of these personal sources is that the

⁶⁸ Brown, p.154.

⁶⁹ H. Reeves, *In the Years That are Gone*, Dunedin, 1947, p.125.

⁷⁰ B. Guthrie, *New Zealand Memories*, London, 1930, p.81.

⁷¹ Guthrie, p.81.

⁷² E. Maxwell, p.23.

⁷³ J. Phillips, *A Man's Country? The Image of the Pakeha Male: a History*, Auckland, 1996, p.118.

⁷⁴ Phillips, p.39.

⁷⁵ See: P. Mein-Smith, "Maternity and Eugenics", in M. Crotty, J. Germov, & G. Rodwell, eds, *"A Race for a Place": Eugenics, Darwinism, and Social Thought and Practice in Australia*, Newcastle, 2000, pp.141-56; P. Mein-Smith, *Maternity in Dispute: New Zealand, 1920-1939*, Wellington, 1986;

ideal is expressed in terms of class or social distinctions. The superior European New Zealand "race" is seen almost exclusively in terms of a superior social group of the "cultured" and the wealthy. Survival of the fittest is a contest in which workers do not tend to win.

The Question of Representation

Why might the majority of these pioneers' autobiographies and reminiscences negatively portray workers, and glowingly depict the "cultured" and wealthy? Examining the self-images of these authors and comparing these with the findings of other chapters is revealing. An inference is that many of the pioneers or older generation were themselves from genteel backgrounds or quickly became successful once arriving in New Zealand. Many of these personal sources were possibly also written for an intended audience who appreciated the somewhat elitist and exclusive focus on the "cultured" and the dismissal of "workers".

Three specific references to the social background of the contemporary pioneers are revealing. Nurse Hester Maclean describes her early life as "that of the ordinary round", and how "education, entrance into society, amusement, such as tennis, dancing, reading, a little artistic work, home nursing, [and] visiting, passed the time at a happy home".⁷⁶ Alice Maxwell, a pioneer woman whose description of early European settlement never once uses the word "class", casually makes recollections like "[t]he following day at dinner, when the maid read out the list of puddings...".⁷⁷ Similarly, Alfred Averill praises his own wife for overcoming "preliminary difficulties" when settling in New Zealand, adding that this was with the "help of an excellent maid".⁷⁸ While one set of images is no more "truthful" than another, some interesting comparisons and contextualisations can be made. The official finding of a 1946 Dominion Population Committee, for instance, was that "domestic help has not been common in New Zealand" and was traditionally a

Phillips.

⁷⁶ H. Maclean, *Nursing in New Zealand: History and Reminiscences*, Wellington, 1932, p.17.

⁷⁷ A. Maxwell, *Memories of a Mission House: Being Reminiscences [sic] of the Early Days of Tauranga*, Tauranga, 1942, p.11.

⁷⁸ A.W. Averill, *Fifty Years in Maoriland, 1894-1944: Recollections and Reflections*, Christchurch, 1945, p.39.

privilege of the “well-to-do”.⁷⁹ This suggests that the upbringing and experiences of pioneers like Averill and Alice Maxwell were unrepresentative of the majority. Indeed, other pioneers recall a different picture of “ordinary” life in early European settlement. Alison points out that there “were very few public tennis courts and the better class of people owned their own tennis courts and held parties on Saturday afternoons”.⁸⁰ Yet Maclean was still maintaining in 1932 that her background, which included tennis, was “that of the ordinary round”. Perhaps Alison is mistaken about the lack of public tennis courts. Alternatively, Maclean was actually part of the “better class” who owned or visited private courts, or was writing for a contemporary audience that would consider her experiences “ordinary”.

There also seems to be a general lack of awareness or concern on the part of the older generation that their views of the current society may have been different from that of the majority. The government’s social welfare legislation and the low social status of “workers” are either criticised or largely ignored. One argument made by the pioneers is that the wealthy and prestigious minority needs protection from the majority of “workers”. A number of the more current social commentaries suggest how these assumptions are less representative of contemporary opinion than part of a genteel generational view.

For instance, while journalist Hyde recognises the existence of attractive, well-to-do members of the contemporary society, she also scathingly depicts their privilege and wealth. She notes how the depression in the 1930s started “the idea of a professional career” for what she describes as vapid but attractive “society buds”.⁸¹ Hyde critically observes how “eminent” women were forced in the depression to join “the rank-and-file of large and enterprising drapery stores...not quite, so it was said, at rank-and-file salaries”. She strongly criticises the inequality between the privileged “well-to-do” and the suffering “workers”. According to Hyde, although these “society girls, some of them the children of very wealthy men” were employed “in almost every branch of trade”, the government did not provide for

⁷⁹ “Dominion Population Committee”, *Appendices to the Journals of the House of Representatives*, 1946, I17, 342, p.95.

⁸⁰ Alison, *Looks on*, p.17.

⁸¹ R. Hyde, *Journalese*, Auckland, 1934, p.106.

“the barest and commonest decencies of life for unemployed women who haven’t wealthy parents to back them up”.⁸² Hyde is criticising the existence of a social hierarchy in which the wealthy are privileged and the workers are lowly-ranked. As revealed throughout this chapter, the recognition of social hierarchy or gradients in the accounts of the older generation is far less critical of social distinction. “Privilege” is not an issue of which these contemporaries seem to be aware. Contemporary issues such as unemployment and economic inequality are largely unaddressed. Possibly the largely retrospective pioneers’ accounts were outdated in, or out of touch with, a society characterised by such problems as inequality. Alternatively, they may have been unconcernedly exclusive, and aimed at a contemporary audience that would consider their experiences “that of the ordinary round”.

Bourdieu argues that “classificatory systems are...the stake of struggles between the groups they characterise and counterpose, who fight over them while striving to turn them to their advantage”.⁸³ His argument can be loosely applied to the “classificatory systems” represented in the three sets of sources so far examined. The advantage of deprecating the elite and sympathetically depicting the suffering workers is that the need for social “levelling” is justified. The advantage of representing a largely classless, conflict-free classificatory system is that the belief in egalitarian ideology is sustained. In these personal sources, the advantage of emphasising the superior and inferior attributes of certain social “grades” is that their ranking, and a hierarchical social system, is defended. Why would anyone want social “levelling” and legislation to elevate the indolent workers at the expense of the wealthy and the “cultured”, who were inherently superior? These are some possible explanations for the great variation and intricacies in representations of ostensibly the same society and history.

Class and Race

However, in keeping with the pattern in other chapters these images are mostly devoid of awareness of class and its relation to race. If Maori are included in images of the social structure of the contemporary society, it is as workers with

⁸² Hyde, pp.106-7.

⁸³ Bourdieu, p.477.

little wealth, power, or status. According to rural doctor Smith, the Maori is “racially and instinctively an agriculturalist and a fisherman...*The less money a Maori handles the better*”. Maori have “small earnings as labourers to the European”, he concluded, and consequently are “practically a race of servants to the European”.⁸⁴ That this racial inequality is not seen as an urgent problem in need of remedying further reflects the unique attitude in a number of these personal sources towards social and economic inequality. On the whole, the existence of social hierarchy and distinctions seems to sit much more comfortably with these contemporaries than with officials, politicians, polemicists, and academics. The ideal society is apparently one in which Maori and workers are only a peripheral focus.

Summary

The importance of community, respectability, and being industrious are three enduring themes throughout the personal sources examined. A common assumption is that social mobility and egalitarianism were characteristics of New Zealand society both prior to and during the 1930s and 1940s. Related to this assumption are the assertions that New Zealand lacked strong economic inequalities and that most of its people belonged to the “middle” or “middle-class” majority. Yet the belief that the contemporary society was justifiably stratified and hierarchically ordered on the basis of ascribed moral, cultural, and physical distinctions is also strongly articulated. The criticisms of “social levelling” and the “working-classes”, and the commendations of the wealthy and the “cultured”, are often connected with this belief. These differences appear to have arisen from two different focuses and two different generational views.

Between the pioneers retrospectively looking at the days of European settlement and many of the social commentators looking at the current society, there is a consensus about the lack of strong social and economic distinctions. Both types of contemporaries tend to present the picture of a society largely untroubled by snobbery, division, and inequality. Yet when the older generation shifted their focus to the current society, their views on egalitarianism also seemed to change.

⁸⁴ G.M. Smith, *Notes*, p.113. (Smith's emphasis)

These contemporaries worried how the low and vulgar “working-classes” had become indolent and greedy and how the government’s social welfare legislation was in danger of taking away the power and wealth of a minority. They compared the current situation with the ideal social structure of early European settlement, when “Jack” knew he was not as good as his “Master”. Their reaction to current trends implies that these contemporaries did not actually believe in or want widespread social and economic equality.

The older pioneers tend to dismiss or denigrate “workers”, and there is no felt need to justify this negative characterisation to readers. They strongly focus on and admire “cultured” and wealthy members of society; often justifying their higher social status on the grounds of their inherent respectability and physical superiority. The pioneers also appear unconcerned or unaware that their experiences or social backgrounds may have been more privileged than “that of the ordinary round”. All this suggests that many of these contemporaries were of genteel origins, or writing for an intended audience that would sympathise with the somewhat elitist and exclusive focus. Opportunities for upward social mobility and financial success may have been great in the days of early European settlement.⁸⁵ But even if one was a “pioneer”, the notion of inherited privilege or ascribed social status points to an exaggeration of actual potential for upward social mobility. The pioneers themselves acknowledge that many of the pioneers who became socially successful and prestigious in New Zealand were evidently already of considerable social standing, although not necessarily wealthy. As Ebenezer Maxwell put it, “an extraordinarily high proportion consisted of those of culture and high attainments and special ability”.⁸⁶ The rigidity of social distinctions and the unequal opportunities for certain social “grades” may have been underplayed in the pioneers’ assumptions of social mobility and “remarkable success” from “humble origins”.

Arguably, the majority of the views expressed in the personal sources examined

⁸⁵ The argument is also made by various historians. See, for example: S. Eldred-Grigg, “Slash and Burn: Riches in a New Colony 1790s to 1870s”, in S. Eldred-Grigg, ed., *The Rich: a New Zealand History*, Auckland, 1996, pp.13-61; J. McAloon, *No Idle Rich: the Wealthy in Canterbury and Otago, 1840-1914*, Dunedin, 2002.

⁸⁶ E. Maxwell, p.192.

are somewhat unrepresentative of general contemporary opinion. According to the younger social commentators, the wealthy were in a minority, the subordination of "workers" was unjustified, and the existence of privilege and economic inequality were problems that needed rectifying in the pursuit of an egalitarian society. Very similar views were expressed by contemporary officials, academics, polemicists, and politicians. Ultimately, the majority of these personal sources may serve only to provide insight onto the "privileged culture of the literate metropolis" rather than the "customary cultures", views, and experiences of the contemporary majority.⁸⁷ Yet they also offer a uniquely personal, contradictory, and thus fundamentally important, contribution to the diverse cultural map of class so far established.

⁸⁷ P.J. Gibbons, "Transporting Culture: the View from the Kermadecs", *The Turnbull Library Record*, 26, 1-2, (1993), p.17.

Chapter 6

Media "Class" Imagery

Introduction and Sources

In his analysis of "media class imagery", Arthur Marwick looks at a range of sources such as Hollywood films and BBC documentaries. In this chapter, the question of how the media represented class in the 1930s and 1940s is approached through a highly specific analysis of the newspaper *New Zealand Truth* (*Truth*). The findings cannot therefore be generalised in regards to all contemporary "media". While partly due to source accessibility and limitations on scope,¹ there is another fundamental reason for this particular "media" focus. Given that most of the sources available for this study are literary or written, the issue of how best to elicit popular or widespread perceptions of class is critical. A number of the contemporaries examined so far were possibly from privileged social backgrounds, highly educated, and considered respectable. Their opinions about class may have been unpopular, unrepresentative, and even elitist. The class images examined so far provide fascinating insight into how academics, public servants, politicians, polemicists, pioneers, and informal social commentators defined and disputed the significance of economic inequality and social distinction. Yet there is a danger that the attitudes and languages of a sizeable proportion of the population have been thus far under-represented. Consequently, *Truth* was chosen for the very reason that it ostensibly spoke for the unprivileged and uneducated majority, and was considered highly unrespectable, popular, and populist.²

The historiography provides strong justifications for focusing on *Truth*. The alleged contemporary reputation and readership of the newspaper suggests that it is a crucial source for this study. According to Jason Burley's analysis of *Truth* in the 1930s, the paper "took on the role of spokesman for the average New Zealander,

¹ During the 1930s and 1940s, films, documentaries, and radio serials were predominately from overseas or officially sanctioned, and television had yet to be introduced. Due to the small scope of this study, specific media sources such as women's magazines could not be included, but are represented in the examination of the women's pages and advertisements in *Truth*.

² R.S.L. Joblin, "The Breath of Scandal: New Zealand *Truth* and Interwar Society, 1918-1939", MA thesis, University of Canterbury, 1990, p.1.

and, therefore, spoke for the underdogs, or average persons in society who could not speak for themselves".³ In his analysis of the audience and market niche of *Truth* from 1918-1939,⁴ R.S.L. Joblin also argues that the paper's readership consisted of "skilled and unskilled manual workers, white collar clerks, shopkeepers, small farmers, [and] the general population".⁵ Joblin concludes that *Truth* was "essentially a working-class paper", which "made an appeal to the mass".⁶

In the last three sets of sources examined, and even by contemporaries who argued that society was classless and free of distinction, workers were repeatedly recognised as a majority social and economic grouping. Nevertheless, workers tended to be given little agency: while often hearing about their problems, one heard little from workers themselves. The voices and views of workers were apparently extensively reported in, and of central importance to, *Truth*. Arguably, another less "populist" or "slanted" media source such as the *Press* would have reflected too similar views and voices to those already examined. John Westergaard maintains that the style of the "popular press...brings it within reach of ordinary people", and amplifies "the practical, nose-to-ground constructions of reality".⁷ Following this theory, the views of "ordinary" contemporaries such as "workers" may be brought into view by examining a newspaper like *Truth*.

This study of class imagery is shaped both by the primary sources available and those selected. Joblin points out that "to form selection criteria one must make value judgements; therefore bias is unavoidable since journalists cannot completely divorce themselves from the society within which they exist".⁸ Admittedly, a value judgement has been made in deciding that *Truth* is likely to be more representative than other available media sources of the popular opinions of the "ordinary", or "average", or "working" majority. The bias of a newspaper also needs addressing.

³ J. Burley, "The Beginnings of Adolescence: N.Z. *Truth*'s Coverage of Anglo-New Zealand Relations, 1935-1939", Dip. Arts, University of Otago, 1992, p.6.

⁴ Joblin, p.ii.

⁵ Joblin, p.29.

⁶ Joblin, pp.iii, 29.

⁷ J. Westergaard, "Power, Class and the Media", in J. Curran, M. Gurevitch, & J. Wollacott, eds, *Mass Communication and Society*, London, 1977, p.113.

⁸ Joblin, p.9.

The historiography cautions how newspapers are influential public mediums, which are neither strictly fictional nor completely objective.⁹ In their discussions of media sociology, S.E. Bird, R.W. Dardenne, and Veronica Berridge argue that newspapers are a reciprocal or interactive symbolic system that acts as a model both of and for a society.¹⁰ Berridge explains how a newspaper “presents a particular form of reality to its readership, albeit they make sense of it, or ‘decode’ it, in different ways”.¹¹ The hermeneutic problem arises again. By implication, *Truth* did not simply cite or purely reflect the views of “ordinary people” but shaped and constructed a “particular form of reality”. Both the present-day researcher and the contemporary reader of *Truth* can only interpret the “understandings of understandings”.¹² Logically, however, this published “reality” had to be largely acceptable and understandable to *Truth*’s readership or the paper would not have remained in print. The rhetoric and assumptions about class in *Truth* are surely somewhat indicative of popular, “ordinary”, or even “working-class” contemporary opinion.

Given that a full content analysis of *Truth* cannot be made under scope restraints, four sections were specifically examined. The sample was the month of June for every year from 1930 to 1949,¹³ and the sections examined include all the “women’s pages”, editorials, letters to the editor, and advertisements excluding classifieds. While this sample choice shapes the following discussion, it also provides a unique perspective from the other types of sources so far examined. Advertisements provide valuable insight into how class or social distinctions were literally visualised and promoted. The decision to focus on women’s pages was in part due to the lack of coverage given in the previously examined sources to women and the possible connections between femininity and class. The letters to

⁹ See: V. Berridge, “Content Analysis and Historical Research on Newspapers”, in M. Harris & A. Lee, eds, *The Press in English Society From the Seventeenth to Nineteenth Centuries*, London, 1986, pp.201-18; S.E. Bird & R.W. Dardenne, “Myth, Chronicle, and Story: Exploring the Narrative Qualities of News”, in J.W. Carey, ed., *Media, Myths, and Narratives: Television and the Press*, Newbury Park, 1988, pp.67-86; L. Galambos, *The Public Image of Big Business in America, 1880-1940: a Quantitative Study in Social Change*, Baltimore, 1975; R. Hornby, *The Press in Modern Society*, London, 1965; G.A. Wood, “Mass Communications”, in A.L. McLeod, ed., *The Pattern of New Zealand Culture*, Melbourne, 1968, pp.257-276; Westergaard, pp.95-115.

¹⁰ Bird & Dardenne, p.76; Berridge, p.206.

¹¹ Berridge, p.207.

¹² C. Lloyd, *Explanation in Social History*, Oxford, 1986, p.263.

¹³ Some issues were missing during the war years. Where June was unavailable, one of the other middle-year months of May or July was examined.

the editor,¹⁴ although influenced by the paper's powers of publishing veto, are also a likely source of the individual opinions of *Truth* readers. Finally, the editorials were examined in order to elicit the kinds of contemporary beliefs and rhetoric about class that *Truth* wished to reflect and reinforce to its readers.

There are three main assumptions about class in these sections of *Truth* during the 1930s and 1940s. In keeping with the general theme of all the sets of sources examined, classlessness and equality of opportunity are apparently strong ideals. From immediate appearances of the sections examined, it might be difficult to imagine a society affected by and aware of class distinctions. Particularly in the advertisements, a strong focus in *Truth* is on the classless community and opportunities for social mobility.

The dominant ideals that were promoted in *Truth* were apparently different from some of the actualities it reported. While the explicit term "class" is hardly used, disparities of wealth, status, and privilege are repeatedly recognised. The dichotomous relationship between the "workers" and wealthy, privileged members of society is a major focus of the editorials and letters. Equality for "workers" is the main objective in the paper's criticism of politicians and any group who are seen to embody privilege and promote inequality. A number of arguments are made about the moral superiority of "workers". A society that was intrinsically equal or at least that offered equal opportunities may have been the ideal vision of *Truth* and its readers. Even so, perceptions of economic inequality and the moral superiority of "workers" suggests how *Truth* was not convinced society was, or even should be, equal.

A third theme, which is especially evident in the women's pages and a number of the advertisements, challenges these two general assumptions. Rather than endorsing the "social levelling" process, many of these images appeal to superiority, to social betterment, and to the attainment of elite status and wealth. Most New Zealanders might be seen by *Truth* to belong to an "ordinary" majority of workers. Yet encouragement to reach the top of the social hierarchy, and

¹⁴ Hereafter simply called "letters".

admiration of those who are already there, is a strong theme in these sections. The distinctive finding of this chapter is how two different attitudes towards privilege are evident in the same source. In all the previously examined sets of sources, if they were not being ignored, the privileged and wealthy tended to be either vilified or favourably presented. In *Truth* they are simultaneously criticised and publicised as desirable. At least throughout the four sections examined, ideals of egalitarianism and classlessness ambivalently coexist with the recognition and affirmation of inequality and privilege.

Egalitarian Ideals and Inequality of Opportunity

Equality of opportunity is a consistent ideology and an inclusive promise in many of the advertisements in *Truth* throughout the period. Grey's Tobacco made appeals to the "vast majority".¹⁵ Phosferine is touted as "everyone's tonic".¹⁶ The inclusiveness of contemporary New Zealand society is favourably contrasted with past exclusiveness. For generations, endorsers of Kruschen Salts claimed, "wealthy overweight people have been visiting those European spas", but now a "multitude" can receive the same treatment.¹⁷ The "snobs" who are unaware that the ordinary majority rules are brought down to size. In an article in the women's pages questioning "How do You Treat Girl Behind Counter?", women who were previously considered "nice unaffected types" are let down by the patronising way they treat the "shop girl". No one "enjoys that air of patronage", the article-writer criticised, and "why should the saleswoman have to put up with it? She's doing her job, the same as everyone else".¹⁸ A common assumption throughout all the sections examined is that "everyone" should be equal.

Opportunity might equally knock "more than once at everyone's door",¹⁹ but differences in status are also marketed in the advertisements as desirable. The classless consumer and consumption as a means of social distinction are two competing ideals in the advertisements. An endorsed goal is to gain "success in

¹⁵ "Greys Tobacco", Advertisement (AD), *Truth*, 2 June 1948, p.17. (All newspaper references are found in *Truth*)

¹⁶ "Phosferine Tonic", AD, 9 June 1948, p.4.

¹⁷ "Kruschen Salts", AD, 3 June 1936, p.7.

¹⁸ "How do You Treat Girl Behind Counter?", Women's Pages (WP), 8 June 1938, p.23.

¹⁹ "Clement's Tonic", AD, 26 June 1930, p.2.

life”,²⁰ to strive for the “more responsible job with bigger pay, bigger scope and opportunities”.²¹ Packard claimed that their cars were the “most beautiful and distinguished”, offering “luxury” and “prestige”.²² Although left unspoken, such distinction was surely not intended for everyone. Joblin points out that during the 1930s, “many of the items advertised in *Truth*...were beyond the pockets of most of the poorest members of the working-class”.²³ Whatever the target audience, the paper seems to have been a medium for incongruous images. On the one hand, advertisements invite individuals to elevate themselves and attain higher prestige than others. On the other, they market a socially mobile, egalitarian society that upholds the class-free majority. *Truth* was perhaps aware that different “class” images of society appeal to, and represent, the different views of its readers. It was also no doubt aware that advertisements provided an important source of revenue. Joblin points out how advertisements were an important component of *Truth* throughout the 1930s, taking up approximately forty-five percent of the paper’s content.²⁴ The commercial imperative may have served to modify the ideological.

While advertisements offered opportunities for social mobility for “everybody”, editors and readers noted the obstacles to taking advantage of the offer. Inequalities of income, status, and “privilege” are repeatedly recognised in the editorials and letters during the period. This is well demonstrated in a 1938 letter on class-based unequal treatment in the Courts. How far does “financial and social standing deflect the true course of justice when the accused hails from the privileged classes?” the letter-writer wondered. The writer was convinced that if “the police arrested a ‘wharfie’ or any labourer, tradesman, or artisan” they would not receive the “solicitous treatment” and “special privileges” accorded to “men of financial standing or luminaries in the social world”.²⁵ In the same paper, images of social hierarchy challenge assumptions of equality of opportunity and outcomes. A 1942 editorial spoke of inequalities in tax increases falling heaviest “on the lowest paid

²⁰ “Clement’s Tonic”, AD, 26 June 1930, p.2.

²¹ “Hemingways Correspondence School”, AD, 7 June 1939, p.20; 12 June 1946, p.12; 19 June 1946, p.12.

²² “Packard Cars”, AD, 16 June 1937, p.13.

²³ Joblin, pp.30-31.

²⁴ Joblin, p.39.

²⁵ “Open Courts”, Letter to Editor (LE), by “Arthur O’Halloran”, 8 June 1938, p.9.

people” while “those on the highest scale...scarcely feel it at all”.²⁶ The social hierarchy or “scale” is also negatively depicted in a 1944 letter on state housing. The letter criticised the government for building houses that “have mainly attracted folk well up the social scale...that were far too substantial and ornate for poor folk”.²⁷ These *Truth* readers and editors evidently see the “social scale” as hierarchical and unequal, rather than horizontal.

In accord with the polemicists and academics, *Truth* editors and letter-writers seem to be primarily concerned about the relationship between the privileged minority and the working majority. While the people at the upper-lower extremes of the hierarchy are the predominant focus of *Truth*, those in the middle or “middle-class” are again an unspecified or insignificant feature. Money and its associated status are the key components of the social distinctions, and particularly the dichotomous distinctions, made in *Truth*. In general, the minority’s privilege is often unfavourably contrasted with the poverty of workers. A 1944 editorial on butter rationing advocated the cause of the “common people”, or more specifically the “workers on low wages” who were “too poor to indulge” at restaurants like the “more fortunate”.²⁸ In 1935, letter-writer Ben Hirst criticised a local politician, who had promised to “serve the worker”, for introducing rates increases that would hurt “the men of small means” and do little to change the position of “high-salaried staff”.²⁹ Maybe poverty and privilege are an inevitable focus in a period of depression, war, and austerity. Following this line of thought, the contrasting focus on economic inequality in the sources examined in chapter five is intriguing. Throughout the personal sources, disparities of wealth were only a minor focus and usually not considered a problem. According to a number of the pioneers, the contemporary government was indulging “workers” while the wealthy and privileged were paying too much. By implication, *Truth* and the personal sources were catering for two quite different audiences and social views.

The Rhetoric of Social Distinctions

As in all the other sources examined, the terms in which the distinctions between

²⁶ “Budget Proposals”, Editorial (ED), 6 May 1942, p.11.

²⁷ “New Bellamys”, LE, by “Awatea”, 14 June 1944, p.12.

²⁸ “Butter Rationing”, ED, 14 June 1944, p.9.

²⁹ “Wage Cuts”, LE, by “Ben Hirst”, 26 June 1935, p.20.

the two main social groups are discussed in *Truth* are rarely clearly defined. One might expect a populist paper like *Truth* to be more blatant in its use of class terminology. Usually, though, an array of ambiguous terms prevails over the use of the actual term "class". Terms such as "walk in life",³⁰ "one's circumstances",³¹ and "position"³² vaguely indicate differences in wealth or status. Again, the question is why contemporaries seem to be reticent in using the term "class". Perhaps *Truth* believed the use of the term would alienate or offend readers, or threaten to undermine the egalitarian ideals the paper espoused. The term "class" may have conjured up too many unwanted or "Old World" connotations of class conflict or consciousness. In talking about social groups and distinctions there definitely seems to be a selective use of terminology in different sections of *Truth*.

In the women's social pages the term "fortunate" is repeatedly used to pleasantly describe the lifestyles and status of the wealthy or privileged. The use of the term "fortunate" is similar to that of "cultured", which is not found in this paper. The attribute "fortunate" signifies the interplay between obvious distinctions based on wealth and occupation, and subtle distinctions based on prestige and lifestyle. While there is evidently some envy of the lifestyles of the "more fortunate",³³ which will be explored later, the term lacks animosity. While the term "fortunate" suggests a degree of luck or chance in social and financial success, it could also be subtly disguising the ascription or inheritance of prestige and privilege. The social pages reported in 1936 that during the winter months of Christchurch, "those very fortunate" are holidaying at hotter destinations.³⁴ There is no detectable lament or critical emphasis that the less "fortunate" do not have the same opportunity. There is also no criticism, and almost congratulation, in the comment that a Miss Theresa Ward, "Sir Cyril and Lady Ward's only daughter", has had the "good fortune" to "trip off to Englandwards for the second year in succession".³⁵ In the context of the women's social pages, the term "fortunate" tends to be used to compliment rather than to criticise those with wealth and privilege.

³⁰ "Amber Tips", AD, 5 June 1930, p.24; "Housewives Well to the Fore", Women's Pages (WP), 19 June 1946, p.24.

³¹ "Nujol", AD, 26 June 1930, p.3.

³² "House Allotments", LE, by "Angry Ex-Serviceman", 9 June 1948, p.16.

³³ "Social Notes", WP, 23 June 1937, p.21.

³⁴ "Social Notes", WP, 3 June 1936, p.21.

³⁵ "Social Notes", WP, 21 June 1939, p.29.

Conversely, the editorials and letters strongly disparage the people who are seen to be “privileged” or to have a “luxurious” lifestyle. The unfavourable and critical characterisation of the wealthy or “privileged classes”³⁶ sets them further apart from the ordinary majority or “common people”. In the apparent anti-luxury, anti-privilege stance of the editorials and letters, politicians are often upheld as exemplifiers of extravagance. The rebuilding of the governmental building Bellamys is interpreted in a 1944 letter as “one more instance of the general taxpayer having to provide luxury for the privileged few”.³⁷ An editorial in 1947 argued how politicians enjoyed the “benefits, privileges and advantages of what is generally understood to be the best stocked and most select club in the land”.³⁸ These “luxurious legislators” are again criticised in the 1948 editorial entitled “Strange Slant on Equality of Sacrifice” for having “placed themselves on a pedestal far above the people by granting themselves a handsome bounty for life”.³⁹ As revealed in chapter four, contemporary politicians certainly did not care to make connections between themselves and such privileges.

In *Truth*, depending on the different section or context, those who are “far above the people” in terms of privilege, status, and luxurious lifestyles are the targets of both belittlement and desire. Criticism of “luxury” is rarely found in advertisements, excepting a slight change during wartime when those consumers who are “economising” and “saving money” are advertised as the ideal,⁴⁰ in tune with the theme of equality of sacrifice. Instead, “aristocrats” and “luxury” are constantly used as desirable product endorsements. The use of aristocratic personalities and the promise of luxury in the advertisements indicate a presumption that the majority of readers would positively respond to such attractions. The use is particularly prevalent in almost every Ponds advertisement, even during wartime stringency. Ponds seems obsessed with titles and invariably makes appeals, which are also gendered, to superiority and luxury. The “Countess

³⁶ “Open Courts”, LE, by “Arthur O’Halloran”, 8 June 1938, p.9.

³⁷ “New Bellamys”, LE, by “Chas C. McAdam”, 14 June 1944, p.9.

³⁸ “Thin Edge of Wedge: Politicians’ Air Travel”, ED, 16 July 1947, p.14.

³⁹ “Strange Slant on Equality of Sacrifice”, ED, 30 June 1948, p.12.

⁴⁰ “Phillips Stick-a-Soles”, AD, 7 May 1941, p.21.

of Warwick” is “another charming aristocrat” endorsing Ponds in 1936,⁴¹ while in 1947 a large number of “titled beauties” are cited as being enthusiastic about Ponds.⁴² Ponds did acknowledge in 1940 that not all of its product users were aristocratic, including both the obligatory “titled English beauty” and a “charming city typist”. Yet even here the distinctions are marked. While Lady Betty Bourke is told “you can afford to pay any price you like for your beauty aids”, Miss Evelyn Cato, the “charming city typist”, is questioned on “how you keep your skin so flawlessly lovely on *your* salary?”.⁴³ The less affluent of the two types is not included again in Ponds advertising. These assumptions about the attractiveness of “titled beauties” are similar to the aesthetic appeal attributed in the personal sources to the wealthy, privileged, and morally superior minority. Here, the superior image is literally advertised as desirable.

The Exclusiveness of “Society”

Most of the advertisements that make appeals to affluence and aristocracy appear next to the social notes on the women’s pages, which is surely no accident. Perhaps women were considered particularly interested in, or susceptible to, the promotion of luxury and the elite. Titled New Zealand women such as “Lady Ferguson” occupy “a proud position” in these pages.⁴⁴ Other women like Miss Evelyn Cato are almost entirely absent. Noticeably, there is a preference for using overseas aristocrat “ladies” in the advertisements. This suggests an actual lack of wealthy superior women in New Zealand or perhaps a desire to uphold local ladies in less blatant a manner. The inference is that despite *Truth*’s strong emphasis on egalitarianism, part of its target audience held a sneaking regard for British aristocracy and a desire to read about the conspicuous consumption of a local elite. Notably, the women’s pages and representation of “Society” are gendered, presumably catering for a mostly female audience. Examination of these pages provides insight on contemporary connections between women and class.

⁴¹ “Ponds”, AD, 3 June 1936, p.21.

⁴² “Ponds”, AD, 14 June 1939, p.12; 7 May 1947, p.17.

⁴³ “Ponds”, AD, 19 June 1940, p.11.

⁴⁴ “Social Notes”, WP, 21 June 1939, p.29.

The largely feminised "Society"⁴⁵ reported in the women's pages is evidently only a very select, elite version of the contemporary society. This is never crudely stated. The few New Zealand women on these pages are known by name, their activities avidly reported, and their appearances and acquisitions described in minute detail. By implication, only an exclusive recognisable minority of the actual female population are being portrayed. It soon becomes clear that membership and coverage is confined to "luminaries in the social world",⁴⁶ to the "most notable figures",⁴⁷ usually of "old and very-well known families".⁴⁸ These almost idolised figures are differentiated from the "common people".⁴⁹ The prose and tone of the pages implies a kind of deference to these figures. This is the ideal world of the "very fortunate",⁵⁰ the "right people" with the "all-important background" who are seen in all "the right places".⁵¹ Implicitly, this is a world where membership is inherent and ideals of intrinsic equality are sidelined.

Seeing the favoured usually only consists of catching glimpses at a distance. Comments such as "Glimpsed: Mrs Alf Gibbons...at the wheel of her big grey car in town, and looking very chic" or "Seen sipping tea recently was Mrs F.G. Haycock...She has a charming new home",⁵² take prominent position in the women's pages. The feeling is that readers are the "we" getting a privileged view of the distant "them". The focus is on leisurely and pleasant "social doings",⁵³ conforming to "well-dressed society",⁵⁴ and acquisitions in houses and clothing. Extravagance and luxury are considered valid targets for criticism in other sections of *Truth*. But here the luxury of these women's privileged lifestyles is admiringly depicted. A Mrs Douglas Lane's "cream fox furs", for example, are approved for the very reason that they "looked most luxurious".⁵⁵ In the women's pages prior to WWII, never once is the conspicuous consumption of these women criticised, the

⁴⁵ "Race Meetings", WP, 7 June 1939, p.38.

⁴⁶ "Open Courts", LE, by "Arthur O'Halloran", 8 June 1938, p.9.

⁴⁷ "Social Notes", WP, 17 June 1936, p.24.

⁴⁸ "Social Notes", WP, 2 June 1937, p.25.

⁴⁹ "Butter Rationing", ED, 14 June 1944, p.9.

⁵⁰ "Social Notes", 3 June 1936, p.21.

⁵¹ "What it Costs World's Best Dressed", WP, 6 June 1934, p.19.

⁵² "Social Notes", WP, 5 June 1940, p.22.

⁵³ "Social Notes", WP, 2 June 1937, p.25.

⁵⁴ "Race Meetings", WP, 7 June 1939, p.38.

⁵⁵ "Social Notes", WP, 5 June 1940, p.22.

words “inequality” or “workers” mentioned, or much room made for women who lack the superior qualities of these ladies.

In wartime it becomes more apparent that these images are non-representative of the wider society. During the early war years the women’s pages are still happy to report that “Society” “has more or less contented itself with the usual congenial round of social doings”.⁵⁶ The ladies are still “holidaying in the country”, and “golf, bridge and indoor parties are arranged when folk find time between patriotic duties”.⁵⁷ War has failed to impinge on this social group’s “pleasant”⁵⁸ activities or unrivalled superior status. As Ponds informed *Truth*’s female readers, “despite war strain”, their titled beauties are still the natural role models, whose beauty methods “you can follow”.⁵⁹

By 1942 some change in focus has occurred. This is no doubt partly due to wartime ideals of equality of sacrifice and the involvement of many women in the war effort. The women’s pages start to include and even elevate “workers”. The spotlight on luxurious “socialites”⁶⁰ is adjusted to incorporate this seeming contradiction. The adjectives applied to the women who appear on the pages are much less “charming”⁶¹ or “attractive”⁶² than “busy” and “hard-working”. During wartime the devotion of women who “work selflessly and tirelessly” is praised.⁶³ Alongside Ponds’ titled beauties, advertisements openly appeal to the “many thousands of women” who spend “hours of standing and walking – cleaning, cooking, and other household duties” and suffer from sore feet.⁶⁴ From the early 1940s onwards, the women’s pages even started to inform female readers that there were worthwhile occupations other than socialising. As the women’s pages in 1942 commented: “no doubt there are many girls who fervently aspire to one day becoming fire chiefs, woman tram conductors, or even railway porters”.⁶⁵ The

⁵⁶ “Social Highlights”, WP, 28 May 1941, p.36.

⁵⁷ “Social Notes”, WP, 7 May 1941, p.36.

⁵⁸ “Social Highlights”, WP, 28 May 1941, p.36.

⁵⁹ “Ponds”, AD, 7 May 1941, p.30; 27 May 1942, p.21.

⁶⁰ “Social Notes”, WP, 21 June 1939, p.29.

⁶¹ “Social Notes”, WP, 10 June 1936, p.24; 16 June 1937, p.28.

⁶² “Social Notes”, WP, 7 June 1939, p.28; 28 June 1939, p.28.

⁶³ “Social Notes”, WP, 20 May 1942, p.20.

⁶⁴ “Zambuk Ointment”, AD, 5 June 1940, p.12; 21 May 1941, p.13.

⁶⁵ “Social Notes”, WP, 27 May 1942, p.20.

“many thousands of women” engaged in household duties, wartime work, and peacetime occupations in factories and offices seem to be the missing puzzle piece. They constitute the “us” gazing at “them”, the majority of the female target audience reading about the experiences and lifestyles of a minority. If only in the wartime context, the previously circumscribed image of “femininity as...very much engaged in affairs social” is considerably enlarged in the women’s pages of *Truth*.⁶⁶

The starkly contrasting images of unglamorous suffering and luxurious socialising confirm suspicions about the exclusiveness of “Society”. With little doubt, the “many thousands” of working women were unlikely to be invited to the leisurely social doings of the elite. This suggests how the contemporary ideals of femininity presented in the women’s pages were elitist and unattainable for the majority of women. It is interesting that the very women who were ostensibly part of the “ordinary”, “common” or “working-class” target audience of *Truth* were largely excluded from the pages that presumably catered for their interests. Of course, the paper may have considered that all women were particularly interested in social gossip and the lifestyles and appearances of the elite. Although highly “feminised”, this exclusive and unrepresentative focus resembles the focus of the personal imagery. Why women’s social pages and advertisements would be permitted to privilege the kinds of people so blatantly criticised elsewhere in *Truth* is uncertain. Perhaps *Truth*’s audience, or at least its female readers, wished to glimpse a luxurious life so completely different from their own. Possibly *Truth* was indulging a contemporary desire to both criticise and envy the wealthy and socially prestigious. The women’s pages signify the strange relationship in *Truth* in general between assumptions of elitism and egalitarianism.

Notably, while the paper provides some insight into contemporary assumptions about femininity and its relation to class, the issue of race was evidently not part of *Truth*’s “class imagery” during the 1930s and 1940s. Once again, Maori and other ethnic minorities are barely included in discussions of inequality and social distinction, and thus only implicitly represented in general categories such as “workers”. Perhaps *Truth* considered the issue of class or economic inequality

⁶⁶ “Social Notes”, WP, 5 June 1940, p.22.

contentious enough without bringing notions of racial inequality into the discussion.

Moral Distinctions, "Workers", and the "Privileged"

In contrast to the women's pages, "workers" or "the working people"⁶⁷ are repeatedly acknowledged as an important majority social group in the editorials and letters. Including even the women's pages, the existence and characteristics of other groups or classes tend to remain unrecognised or ambiguous in *Truth*. The term "upper-class", for example, is never used, even though there are references to the "privileged classes"⁶⁸ and "those on the highest scale".⁶⁹ Workers are comparatively well demarcated, and the only distinct group perceived in *Truth* aside from the privileged and wealthy, or members of "Society". While the term "working-class" is infrequently used, *Truth*'s editorials and letters favourably represent and predominately target "workers" as their audience. Again, it seems unnecessary for contemporaries to clarify whether the term "workers" refers to wage earners or to all people who "work".

According to the letters and editorials, "workers" are distinguished by their poverty and the associated attributes of insecurity and want. A letter titled "Below Breadline" in 1944 asked the Labour government to do something for the "thousands" of "workers on small salaries so that they do not have to endanger their health".⁷⁰ Similarly, another writer argued that "workers" are "men of small means, who cannot pay their rates", and beseeched his local politician to honour his promise to "serve the worker".⁷¹ State housing appears to be the most important area where the poor worker was apparently being treated unequally. Again, this view surfaces in reference to the rebuilding of Bellamys. A letter-writer detailed her conversation about this issue with a "real working woman" who was "furious" about the poor "homes the workers are to get" due to the government's over-expenditure on Bellamys. This woman lambasted the "men who had the inhumanity to order its erection" for leaving those "who worked and fought" to

⁶⁷ "This Sympathy", LE, by "Phyllis M. Hall", 13 June 1945, p.16.

⁶⁸ "Open Courts", LE, by "Arthur O'Halloran", 8 June 1938, p.9.

⁶⁹ "Budget Proposals", ED, 6 May 1942, p.11.

⁷⁰ "Below Breadline", LE, by "Weary", 14 June 1944, p.12.

⁷¹ "Wages Cuts", LE, by "Ben Hirst", 26 June 1935, p.20.

“huddle in discomfort and misery in cold, winter weather in any sort of shack or slum”.⁷² The image might be dramatic but it conveys a common attitude about the government’s inadequacy in providing for workers. Another letter-writer in 1944 commented that “no navvies or coal carriers or common workers” were actually housed in the state houses that “were supposed to be erected for the worker”.⁷³ Another in 1948 made a clear connection with poverty and the workers, observing that the “State housing scheme was, at its inception, to provide homes for the poorer classes”.⁷⁴ Other letters informed how there “are people living in State houses in responsible positions drawing large salaries”.⁷⁵ One letter-writer solemnly concluded that many of “us workers now see the light...partly through our own bitter experiences of being let down by a Government which promised to assist the worker”.⁷⁶ The outrage of “us workers” is morally justified in *Truth*.

These images shed light on a very different perspective of the Labour government’s welfare legislation and its relationship with workers. Many of the academics and officials praised the government for extensively protecting and providing for workers. In this view, the government had done much to bring about a classless egalitarian society. Some of the pioneers even complained that workers were receiving far too privileged or generous treatment. To them, the government had done too much. Either attitude is rare in *Truth*. Occasionally it is suggested by letter-writers that the poverty of tenants in the state houses was due to “spoon-feeding by the State”,⁷⁷ but this is an unpopular opinion. Throughout all the previously examined sets of sources, workers were repeatedly represented as the passive recipients of governmental benevolence. In *Truth*, they are the angry victims whose relationship with the Labour government and other privileged contemporaries is disempowering rather than conflict-free. Apparently the government had not done nearly enough.

In the editorials and letters, workers are often characterised as defenceless and disillusioned because of the failure of the Labour government to carry out its

⁷² “New Bellamys”, LE, by “IRA”, 14 June 1944, p.9.

⁷³ “Birthrate Bleating”, LE, by “Husky”, 14 June 1944, p.12.

⁷⁴ “Housing”, LE, by “Cuckoo”, 16 June 1948, p.16.

⁷⁵ “State Houses”, LE, by “British Justice”, 16 July 1947, p.20.

⁷⁶ “Clothing Prices”, LE, by “Soolem Sid”, 14 June 1944, p.9.

⁷⁷ “Living in Cowbyre”, LE, by “Whose Fault?”, 26 June 1946, p.18.

election promises. Many of the editorials and letters, particularly from the mid 1940s onwards, claim to be fighting against privilege in order to remedy the position of “the poorly paid workers who are told that nothing can be done for them”.⁷⁸ The assumption is illustrated in a letter-writer’s interpretation of the government’s suggestion to ban British exports to New Zealand in order to encourage the buying of local goods. Instead of being “only too pleased to assist England”, the letter explained, “our leaders are doing the very opposite at the expense of the working man”.⁷⁹ The confusing letter is telling in its very brevity. This is similar to the lack of accompanying explanation in the personal sources for the attribution of indolence and selfishness to the “working-classes”. In this source, there is evidently no felt need to explain exactly why or how workers will be negatively affected. It is thought convincing and emotive enough to state simply that political leaders are acting “at the expense of the working man”. The inference is that “us workers”⁸⁰ are the intended audience of *Truth* who know and accept the storyline and require no added explanation. According to the editorials and letters, the privileged and the Labour government are themselves somehow morally inferior.

H.G. Oxley argues that in an egalitarian environment, perception “of an oppressor provides more than a sense of fellowship in misery; it provides a form of scapegoat”. “Superordinate scapegoats”, Oxley explains, “cannot serve as objects of open vengeance but they can serve as objects of blame”.⁸¹ *Truth*’s reporting of the government rebuilding of Bellamys at a time when workers were apparently crying out for state housing is perhaps an example of the blame-pointing. This kind of imagery, as Oxley interprets it, stimulates perceptions of workers’ “disadvantages” and “suffering under oppression”.⁸² Politicians are often reported in *Truth* as the scapegoats for the workers’ suffering in an apparently egalitarian-friendly environment. The question remains over whether *Truth* was simply reflecting, or attempting to convert, the opinions of its audience about the

⁷⁸ “State Housing”, LE, by “Plutocrat?”, 2 June 1948, p.16.

⁷⁹ “British Goods”, LE, by “Dija’s Son”, 27 June 1945, p.16.

⁸⁰ “Clothing Prices”, LE, by “Soolem Sid”, 14 June 1944, p.9.

⁸¹ H.G. Oxley, *Mateship in Local Organisation: a Study of Egalitarianism, Stratification, Leadership, and Amenities Projects in a Semi-Industrial Community in Inland New South Wales*, St Lucia, 1974, p.48.

⁸² Oxley, pp.47-48.

apparently unfulfilled promises of the Labour government. A similar question also remains over whether the public servants and politicians examined in chapter four were simply reflecting or deliberately constructing a picture of society as largely conflict-free and classless. Different political imperatives seem to have exerted considerable influence on what politicians and *Truth* writers chose to report about the same society.

While the editorials and letters of *Truth* strongly focus on the suffering and subordination of “workers”, there is an unmistakable attitude that “worker” is a title of which to be proud. Numerous letters are from self-titled “workers”.⁸³ A further illustration is how the “real working woman”⁸⁴ was proudly cited by one letter-writer as a valid commentator on governmental policy. The letters and editorials of *Truth* criticise the poverty and powerlessness of “workers”, yet attribute workers with considerable social status. According to Elizabeth Bott, the attribution is typical for those who subscribe to a dichotomous class model. The aspiration is for “a better deal” for the “working-class” as a whole, which is regarded “as lacking in power but not prestige”.⁸⁵ The finding is similar to Joblin’s conclusion that the writers and editors of *Truth* saw themselves as moral “crusaders for the ordinary New Zealander, the common man”, and “were always ready to condemn those in high places who acted immorally”.⁸⁶ Workers might be economically inferior in reality, but in *Truth* they are morally elevated above “those in high places”.

At least in the editorials and letters, *Truth*’s representation of the contemporary society is arguably extremely slanted in favour of workers. That few letters appear to be written from or on behalf of the wealthy and privileged members of society, or “them”, is a further illustration of the central focus on “us workers”.⁸⁷ This contrasts to the minor, uncomplimentary focus on “workers” and the positive characterisation of privileged, “cultured”, and wealthy members of society in many

⁸³ For example: “Give Them a Go”, LE, by “Worker”, 10 June 1936, p.23.

⁸⁴ “New Bellamys”, LE, by “IRA”, 14 June 1944, p.9.

⁸⁵ E. Bott, *Family and Social Network: Roles, Norms, and External Relationships in Ordinary Urban Families*, London, 1968; cit. K. Roberts, F.G. Cook, S.C. Clark, & E. Semeonoff, *The Fragmentary Class Structure*, London, 1977, pp.4-5.

⁸⁶ Joblin, p.42.

⁸⁷ “Clothing Prices”, LE, by “Soolem Sid”, 14 June 1944, p.9.

of the personal sources. According to *Truth's* editorials and letters, to be part of the "common people"⁸⁸ is to be accepted and even admired, rather than to be considered vulgar and low. Taxes on the "workingman's tobacco and glass of beer", a letter-writer argued, was denying the "working, liberal realistic mind" to find "solace in a quiet smoke".⁸⁹ While the "working, liberal realistic mind" is complimented throughout the letters and editorials, the deceit, selfishness, greed, and "privilege" of politicians and "the moneyed people"⁹⁰ is strongly criticised. Such people may be prestigious and economically superior, as many of the pioneers examined in chapter five maintained. According to *Truth*, though, they are morally inferior for failing to fulfil their promises to workers, and for their privilege and excess consumption in the areas of state housing, government expenditure, and indeed even in the restaurants during wartime butter rationing. In the personal sources, workers tended to be implicitly characterised as "them". The indolence, vulgarity, and selfishness of workers apparently rendered them morally inferior. Classifications between "them and us" are powerful and diversely interpreted indicators of privilege and inferiority in the different sets of sources.

Oxley provides an interesting interpretation of the egalitarian ideas of "low-status and/or one-class groups", which is generally applicable to the images of workers and the privileged in the four examined sections of *Truth*. He argues that these groups tend to see themselves as "unjustly oppressed by the rest of society". Oxley also found that in spite of their egalitarianism, such groups "rate their fellows better and worse", and "tend to deny the superiority of people in superordinate groups", making "counter-claims to moral superiority".⁹¹ According to the historiography and as revealed throughout this chapter, *Truth* tends to see itself as representing mainly the egalitarian ideas of a "low-status" group of "workers". Particularly in the letters and editorials, the unjust oppression of the "workers" majority by a "superordinate" minority is repeatedly recognised. In this view, 1930s and 1940s New Zealand was a society in which avenues to social mobility were blocked for workers, and equality of opportunity and outcomes were therefore not widespread realities. Editorially and in the self-images of the letter-

⁸⁸ "Butter Rationing", ED, 14 June 1944, p.9.

⁸⁹ "Taxes", LE, by "For Victory", 13 May 1942, p.11.

⁹⁰ "At the Pictures", LE, by "Reasonable", 30 June 1948, p.16.

⁹¹ Oxley, pp.46-47.

writers, workers were consistently rated as morally better than privileged and wealthy members of society, and the superiority of political figures was particularly denied. At the same time, in advertisements and women's pages, *Truth* promoted the wealth, luxurious lifestyles, and prestige of the elite, the aristocratic, and the privileged as desirable. By implication, these attributes were largely unattainable for the majority of the contemporary population. The distinct impression is that *Truth* did not believe that the morally superior workers and the economically superior were intrinsically equal, or even that they should be. Perhaps the privileging of workers in the editorials and letters of *Truth* was aimed at counteracting the actual privilege pertaining to the people paraded in the advertisements and women's pages.

Conclusion

If only in comparison with the sources so far examined, *Truth's* representation of a stratified society in which inequality and privilege exist in an ambivalent relationship is unique. The ambivalence is a significant indication of the tension between contemporary notions of egalitarianism and elitism.

The influence of traditional egalitarian ideology on contemporary thinking was revealed throughout the last three chapters. Similar rhetoric and notions are also apparent in the examined sections of *Truth*. The traditional depiction of New Zealand was as a society "free of those rigid class divisions which in the Old World prevented men from improving their condition in life". "If a man was prepared to work hard", as David Hamer summarises, "he would 'get on': that was the promise of New Zealand".⁹² It was also the promise of many of the advertisements in *Truth*. "Everybody" was offered the opportunity, through classless consumption, to improve their occupation, income, and status. The implication is that equality of opportunity and social mobility were ideals and characteristics of the contemporary society.

Ironically, while the same traditional rhetoric was being spouted in its pages, *Truth* was pointing out that the actual opportunities for social advancement were far from

⁹² D. Hamer, *The New Zealand Liberals: the Years of Power, 1891-1912*, Auckland, 1988, p.52.

ideal. As the editors and letter-writers continuously argued, no matter how hard “workers” were apparently working and suffering, they were not “getting on”. Obviously not “everybody” could afford the luxury and prestige advertisers offered in *Truth*. Indeed, according to the other three sections examined, the contemporaries who had achieved high status, privilege, and wealth were in a minority. The minority is a common target in the editorials and letters. They are strongly criticised for their disproportionate amount of status and wealth particularly in comparison to the poor economic status of “workers”. In this view, while equality of opportunity and equality of sacrifice were strong ideals, they had yet to be realised in New Zealand.

In the women’s pages and a number of advertisements in *Truth*, the ascribed high status and intrinsic attractiveness of the minority was also endorsed. Perhaps *Truth* did not realise that the endorsement threatens to contradict the claims it mounted about the need for equality. The esteem and even envy of the “more fortunate” in *Truth* is a strange complement to the criticism and belittlement of the privileged. To some extent, the importance placed on moral distinctions explains *Truth*’s disparate assumptions of the inferiority and superiority of workers and the privileged. On one hand, the paper admitted and even admired the economic superiority of the minority, and the prestigious lifestyles and appearances of the elite “Society”. Of course, according to advertisers, editors, and letter-writers, the elite had many of the attributes and acquisitions that “everyone” or “us workers” desired. Indeed, perhaps the call for equality in *Truth* served to provide what Jack Vowles describes as “a good weapon for those who would stand to gain from a more egalitarian society”.⁹³ On the other hand, *Truth* stressed the moral superiority of the “working” majority over politicians and other privileged members of society. The elite are represented in *Truth* as both the distant ideal in a hierarchical, stratified, and implicitly unequal society, and also the moral problem in a largely egalitarian society. If only judging by the four sections examined, throughout the 1930s and 1940s *Truth* seems to have vacillated over which kind of society it was actually reflecting and wanting.

⁹³ J. Vowles, “Liberal Democracy: Pakeha Political Ideology”, *New Zealand Journal of History*, 21, 2, (1987), p.221.

Chapter 7

Fictional "Class" Imagery

Introduction and Sources

The focus of this chapter is on "fictional class imagery",¹ or how social distinctions and inequality were represented in a range of New Zealand novels and short stories published during the 1930s and 1940s. By now the reader might be exclaiming, like a character in one novel, "Oh my god! And now I suppose we've got to hear all about your class complex once more".² This is indeed the final and necessary stage of the analysis. The preceding examination of the "populist and popular"³ newspaper *Truth* went some way to unravelling the mystery surrounding popular, common or "ordinary"⁴ perceptions of class. As Arthur Marwick points out, fiction is also an important artifact of this relatively unexplored "popular culture".⁵ The novels and short stories examined here are another possible voice of, and for, the people.

The historiography provides strong justification to concentrate on these particular literary sources. Cherry Hankin hails the novel as "the most significant artistic expression of man's relationship to the wider society in which he lives". This is because, she argues, "the complex social structure of the large community...in one way or another serves as the novelist's point of reference, his focus".⁶ Although statistics and "historical investigation may reinforce or controvert the impression" which these fictional forms convey, Dennis McEldowney adds, it is through such

¹ A. Marwick, *Class: Image and Reality in Britain, France and the USA Since 1930*, Houndmills, 1990, p.137.

² M. Escott, *Show Down* (1936), Auckland, 1973, pp.72-73.

³ R.S.L. Joblin, "The Breath of Scandal: New Zealand *Truth* and Interwar Society, 1918-1939", MA thesis, University of Canterbury, 1990, p.1.

⁴ Joblin, p.42.

⁵ Marwick, p.137.

⁶ C. Hankin, "Introduction", in C. Hankin, ed., *Critical Essays on the New Zealand Novel*, Auckland, 1976, p.viii.

forms "that we live...in those times and that society".⁷ As Heather Roberts maintains, in the historian's attempt to comprehend the past as it appeared to those present, fiction is a valuable "social document".⁸

The impetus behind the creation of these particular "fictional worlds"⁹ is another justification for the focus on novels and short stories. According to the historiography, this impetus was a conscious awareness of, and striving to depict, reality. Literary analysts such as Joan Stevens and Lawrence Jones argue that the 1930s and 1940s was a time when New Zealand fiction grew up,¹⁰ when writers developed a new mode of writing termed "critical realism".¹¹ The focus was on writing "New Zealand" as it was, or at least as fictional writers saw it,¹² rather than as it had been previously idealised. The importance of studying such "realist" fiction should not be underestimated.

Much of the fiction selected in this study was also immensely popular,¹³ which creates the potential for greater insight. Logically, the assumptions about class in the fiction had to have been acceptable or widespread for the fiction to have sold so well. The historiography claims that the fictional characters are conscious reflections of, and references to, members of the society in which the writers lived. By reading this fiction one is arguably conversing with a valid range of contemporary voices, or at least widely accepted stereotypes of contemporary New Zealanders. Obviously, this process is both inhibited and aided by the fact that the author is the chief interpreter. Yet as Terry Sturm argues, because "popular fiction closely addresses what authors perceive to be the fundamental values and behaviour (and often the wishes or needs) of their large readerships, it also provides rich insights (directly or indirectly) into

⁷ D. McEldowney, "John A. Lee's *Children of the Poor*", in C. Hankin, ed., *Critical Essays on the New Zealand Novel*, Auckland, 1976, p.39.

⁸ H. Roberts, "Public and Private Realities: the Subjective Novel in New Zealand", PhD thesis, University of Canterbury, 1980, p.268.

⁹ H.W. Rhodes, *New Zealand Novels: a Thematic Approach*, Wellington, 1969, p.54.

¹⁰ J. Stevens, *The New Zealand Novel, 1860-1965*, Wellington, 1965, p.50.

¹¹ L. Jones, "Introduction: Part 1: Barbed Wire and Cowpats: Critical Realism", in L. Jones, ed., *Barbed Wire & Mirrors: Essays on New Zealand Prose*, Dunedin, 1990, pp.17-18.

¹² Hankin, p.viii.

¹³ For example, the millionth copy of Ngaio Marsh's novels was sold in 1949. T. Sturm, "Popular Fiction", in T. Sturm, ed., *The Oxford History of New Zealand Literature in English*, Auckland, 1991, p.510.

New Zealand society and history".¹⁴ Clearly, this fictional analysis continues the previous explorations of the subtle connections between ideal and critical reality in the imagery of class.

Given the number produced,¹⁵ the difficult task of deciding what novels should be examined was governed by the following criteria. The novels all had to have been about New Zealand society and written between 1930 and 1949. They also had to have received critical acclaim, had popular appeal, or garnered commercial success during that period. In this way, the novels studied are those that were proclaimed by contemporary reviewers and readers themselves as highly realistic and popular. The selection was informed in large part from an extensive analysis of contemporary and present-day literary reviews.¹⁶ The criterion for selecting the short stories was their inclusion in New Zealand anthologies and the historiography in general.¹⁷ A wide variety of anthologies were sampled, from selections governed by the "simple decision

¹⁴ Sturm, p.497.

¹⁵ According to Burns' bibliographical record, from 1930 to 1949, about 150 novels were published in New Zealand. J. Burns, *New Zealand Novels and Novelists, 1861-1979*, Auckland, 1981.

¹⁶ P. Day, "Mulgan's *Man Alone*", in C. Hankin, ed., *Critical Essays on the New Zealand Novel*, Heinemann, Auckland, 1976, pp.60-72; R. Goodman, "Introduction", in M. Escott, *Show Down*, Auckland, 1973, pp.ix-xxvi; Hankin, pp.vii-xvi; L. Jones, *Barbed Wire & Mirrors*; L. Jones, "The Novel", in T. Sturm, ed., *The Oxford History of New Zealand Literature in English*, Auckland, 1991, pp.105-202; E.H. McCormick, *Letters and Art in New Zealand*, Wellington, 1940; E.H. McCormick, *New Zealand Literature: a Survey*, Oxford, 1959; A.E. Mulgan, *Great Days in New Zealand Writing*, Wellington, 1962; J.C. Reid, *Creative Writing in New Zealand: a Brief Critical History*, Auckland, 1946; Rhodes; Roberts; R.E. Robinson & N. Wattie, *The Oxford Companion to New Zealand Literature*, Auckland, 1998; Stevens; M. Williams, *Leaving the Highway: Six Contemporary New Zealand Novelists*, Auckland, 1990.

¹⁷ R. Chapman, "Fiction and the Social Pattern", in W. Curnow, ed., *Essays on New Zealand Literature*, Auckland, 1973, pp.71-98; D. Davin, *Classic New Zealand Short Stories*, Auckland, 1997; D. Dowling, *A Senior Student Guide to Eight Classic New Zealand Short Stories*, Havelock North, 1998; J.C. Gries, "An Outline of Prose Fiction in New Zealand", PhD thesis, Auckland University College, 1951; N.F. Hoggard, *Centennial Miscellany: an Anthology of Short Stories and Verse*, Wellington, 1939; J. Jones & J. Jones, *New Zealand Fiction*, Boston, 1983; B. Manhire, *N.Z. Listener Short Stories, Volume 2*, Wellington, 1978; O. Marshall, *Essential New Zealand Short Stories*, Auckland, 2002; M. McLeod & B. Manhire, *Some Other Country: New Zealand's Best Short Stories*, Wellington, 1992; P.C. Meikle, *Short Stories by New Zealanders*, Auckland, 1970; P.C. Meikle, *Short Stories by New Zealanders Two*, Auckland, 1972; M. Morrissey, *The Flamingo Anthology of New Zealand Short Stories*, Auckland, 2000; V. O'Sullivan, *The Oxford Book of New Zealand Short Stories*, Auckland, 1992; I. Reid, *Fiction and the Great Depression: Australia and New Zealand, 1930-1950*, Melbourne, 1979; H.W. Rhodes, *New Zealand Fiction Since 1945: a Critical Survey of Recent Novels and Short Stories*, Dunedin, 1968; F. Sargeson, *Speaking for Ourselves*, Christchurch, 1945; J. Stevens, *New Zealand Short Stories: a Survey with Notes for Discussion*, Wellington, 1968; A. Stones, *Celebration: an Anthology of New Zealand Writing From the Penguin New Writing Series*, Auckland, 1984; L. Wevers, "The Short Story", in T. Sturm, ed., *The Oxford History of New Zealand Literature in English*, Auckland, 1991, pp.203-70.

to print the best stories”,¹⁸ to those stories by amateur writers “who are not at all known today”.¹⁹ In short, the novels and stories chosen are some of the best contemporary representatives. Fourteen novels²⁰ and fifty-five short stories²¹ were specifically analysed.

These sources are shown to confirm and extend on some enduring themes or common images in the study overall: the seeming absence of a “middle-class”, the importance of being considered part of the classless “community”, the existence of a “workers” majority and a privileged minority, and the ambivalence in distinguishing between egalitarian ideals and implications of inequality. To use Elizabeth Bott and Marwick’s terms, these are the familiar “strains of consistency”²² between all chapters, which together form the broad outline of a contemporary “cultural map of class”.²³ Moreover, the fiction also provides unique insight into less commonly discussed subjects such as the exclusiveness of “Society”, ambivalent reactions to social aspirations and upward social mobility, and the emphasis on appearance and physique as the basis for social distinctions. The specific insight serves to fill in the general outlines, enriching the accumulated knowledge on such contemporary themes as egalitarianism, elitism, and the meaning of the term “class” itself.

¹⁸ McLeod & Manhire, “Introduction”, *Some Other Country*, p.ix.

¹⁹ J. Jones & J. Jones, p.75.

²⁰ C.R. Allen, *A Poor Scholar: a Tale of Progress*, Dunedin, 1936; F.S. Anthony, *Follow the Call*, Dunedin, 1936; D.W. Ballantyne, *The Cunninghams* (1948), Christchurch, 1976; D. Davin, *Roads From Home*, London, 1949; E. De Mauny, *The Huntsman in His Career*, London, 1949; M. Escott, *Show Down* (1936), Auckland, 1973; J. Guthrie, *The Little Country*, London, 1935; R. Hyde, *The Godwits Fly*, London, 1938; J.A. Lee, *Children of the Poor* (1934), London, 1963; N. Marsh, *Colour Scheme*, Boston, 1943; B. McCarthy, *Castles in the Soil*, Dunedin, 1939; J. Mulgan, *Man Alone* (1939), Auckland, 1972; F. Sargeson, *That Summer* (1938-1941), *The Stories of Frank Sargeson*, Auckland, 1982, pp.145-227; N.M. Scanlan, *Pencarrow*, London, 1932. Notably, Sargeson’s *That Summer* is more a novella than a novel.

²¹ For a list of all the stories examined, refer to this chapter’s bibliography. That some of the authors have written both a novel and a short story adds confirmation to the decision to analyse them collectively. The overlap is inevitable, given the relatively small number of critically acclaimed and widely popular local fictional writers in this period. That the selection includes no Maori writers and an unequal ratio of male to female writers is also an accurate reflection of the times.

²² E. Bott, *Family and Social Network: Roles, Norms, and External Relationships in Ordinary Urban Families*, London, 1968, p.171.

²³ Marwick, p.12.

"Class" and Social Hierarchy

One must first of all note that while class might be the focus of this study, it tends to be only a minor preoccupation throughout the fiction examined. Notwithstanding this important observation, when stratification, inequality, or social distinctions are discussed in the fiction, the word "class" is commonly used. Compared to most of the previously examined sources, the use of explicit class terms like "working-class", "upper-class", and even occasionally "bourgeoisie" is relatively frequent throughout the fiction examined. The existence of such terms goes some way to balancing the varied array of ambiguous terms such as "station in life"²⁴ and "top-notch"²⁵. In stark contrast to the reticence and even avoidance of using the term in the official and political sources, "class" seems to be a taken-for-granted idiom in the fiction. One is tempted to express the same sense of surprise as a character in Ngaio Marsh's *Colour Scheme*, who exclaims: "You've become maddeningly class-conscious all of a sudden".²⁶

Usually, though, the consciousness of class fails to extend beyond the use of the term. In other words, there are few clear definitions and descriptions of the meaning of class in these fictional sources. One exception is worth examining. Two characters in Marsh's novel actually sit down and discuss what they think constitutes "class" after deciding that another is "not out of the top drawer...poor thing". The daughter asks her mother "what *is* the top drawer? It's a maddening sort of way to classify people". She is warned not to mix up "money and breeding" but to concentrate on that "innate something" that does not concern "what one *does*".²⁷ This awareness of the imprecise and elusive meaning of the term "class" is significant. It bears parallels to the emphasis in the academic and polemical sources on the complex and multiple meanings of class. Such awareness may clarify why the majority of the contemporaries examined in all the different chapters only infrequently or inexplicably used the term. Given that class seems difficult to define then, its contemporary

²⁴ McCarthy, p.1; G.R. Gilbert, "Mrs Pornog's Afternoon" (1945), in F. Sargeson, ed., *Speaking for Ourselves*, Christchurch, 1945, p.55.

²⁵ McCarthy, p.48.

²⁶ Marsh, pp.106-7.

²⁷ Marsh, p.13. (Marsh's emphasis)

meaning is even more difficult to comprehend now.

While most of the writers or characters do not trouble themselves with defining the term, distinctions of class evidently still matter in the fiction. In the end, the mother's insistence on class as that "innate something" which one "can always tell" is defeated by the daughter's insistence on the significance of money. The mother concedes that the "awful accent" of her son would have been remedied "if we could have afforded [it]". The daughter then triumphantly wins her argument that "Class consciousness is all my eye. Fundamentally it's based on money".²⁸ This view of class is also fundamental to the majority of the fictional sources examined. In general, if class is ever discussed it is usually in terms of a social hierarchy based on differences in money and associated status. The highly wealthy Dennis in Beryl McCarthy's *Castles in the Soil* is positioned at "the top of the tree", and is described as a man "oozing prosperity and importance".²⁹ Money appears as a valid buyer, and signifier, of social distinction. Wealthy Mrs Pornog, in a short story by Gavin Gilbert, invites a factory employee to "be lifted from his station in life and enjoy the unostentatious luxury that marks out the rich who have always been rich, and who are completely secure in their wealth".³⁰ The working protagonist in Margaret Escott's *Show Down* marries a wealthy, privileged woman who explains to her husband that "there was the money and why should we live down to the level of my income instead of enjoying the advantages of hers".³¹

Her husband's conclusion that "it frightened me being so unequal"³² is telling. A common criticism of the hierarchical social structure is of the unfair social and economic distinctions between those who have and those who want. The criticism is similar to the contemporary perceptions revealed in previous chapters of the cleavages between rich and poor, and privileged and underprivileged. Erik De Mauny's *The Huntsman in His Career* provides a dramatic image of a working woman who had a

²⁸ Marsh, p.13.

²⁹ McCarthy, p.291.

³⁰ Gilbert, "Mrs Pornog's Afternoon", p.55.

³¹ Escott, p.47.

³² Escott, p.47.

“craving for gentility”³³ but died “haunted by the need for money”.³⁴ John A. Lee’s *Children of the Poor* claims that “Society is organised to victimise the very poor”³⁵ and sees the stigma of charity as a signifier of their low status. The “patched left-offs of wealthier families” are depicted as a “brand of inferiority” for Lee’s poor protagonist.³⁶ There is a vivid image of the protagonist’s family being given only the lowest quality scraps of charity meat, accompanied by the author’s satiric explanation that “Charity must taste like charity, lest poor folk develop an inflated idea of themselves”.³⁷ The deficient social and economic status of the poor indicates their position in the lower ends of the social hierarchy. Particularly given that so many of the other sources emphasised how disparities of wealth and the poor were only a minor feature of society, it is interesting that poverty is criticised as a major social issue in such fictional sources. The intensely internal focus of writers such as Lee, and the external or comparative focus of many of the academics, pioneers, and younger social commentators, provide two contrasting perspectives of the degree of inequality in the same society.

Criticism of inequality and social hierarchy is often in the form of denunciation of those “at the top”.³⁸ The characterisation of rich and “self-centered”³⁹ Lily in McCarthy’s novel is a strong illustration of a commonly expressed attitude in the fiction towards the privileged and wealthy. Lily spends a good deal of the novel trying to reach the “top of the tree”,⁴⁰ but upon gaining this position is ultimately the least happy and fulfilled character. Her nephew gives a dismal characterisation: “She had so much and so little. A big home like a tomb, and no one to live in it except herself...and a big bank balance she was frightened to spend”.⁴¹ A reformed couple in Nelle Scanlan’s *Pencarrow* realise how living “up to their income” was “a pathetic

³³ De Mauny, p.147.

³⁴ De Mauny, p.149.

³⁵ Lee, *Children*, p.122.

³⁶ Lee, *Children*, p.131.

³⁷ Lee, *Children*, p.133.

³⁸ McCarthy, p.291.

³⁹ McCarthy, p.164.

⁴⁰ McCarthy, p.291.

⁴¹ McCarthy, p.132.

effort to keep pace with wealthier people". They look back, or rather down, "on all those poor, petty clerks and their wives – bank clerks and commercial clerks – and the little tin-pot social gods they worshipped".⁴² By implication, the people at the top are just as pathetic as those trying to reach their position.

Snobbery and the "Community"

It is no coincidence that the couple's reformation comes from immersing themselves into the "community". This position is typically portrayed as the desirable middle ground between extreme poverty and privilege. To be "in the community"⁴³ is a widely accepted and advocated marker of prestige. The couple discover in opening a country hotel that "they filled a real niche in the community", and learn that "it did not matter much what you did in this world, so long as you did it well; with sincerity and dignity".⁴⁴ The high status of belonging to this ordinary, undistinguished community is advocated in David Ballantyne's *The Cunninghams*. As one character put it: "a comfortable job, a wife, a child, the prospect of a State house...what more did anybody want?".⁴⁵ The repeated moral justifying of the "community" throughout the fiction is similar to how politicians and public servants repeatedly upheld the "community" ideal.

Advocacy for this ideal sometimes even comes from the mouths of the wealthy and privileged members of society. In McCarthy's novel, the wealthy bored Victor evades his wife's "affectations" by going to her "common" relation's farmhouse, where "the noises were homely, not hollow".⁴⁶ In Escott's novel, the "upper-class" Anna also reveals that behind her "beautiful, superior shell", she "longed desperately for the warmth of people – real people - not merely polite acquaintances".⁴⁷ This is one of the few instances throughout the entire analysis when a degree of downward social mobility has been advocated. It serves to demonstrate further the high prestige given

⁴² Scanlan, p.252.

⁴³ Scanlan, pp.252-3.

⁴⁴ Scanlan, pp.252-3.

⁴⁵ D. Ballantyne, "And the Glory" (1948), in D. Davin, ed., *Classic New Zealand Short Stories*, Auckland, 1997, p.251.

⁴⁶ McCarthy, pp.87-88.

⁴⁷ Escott, p.40.

in the fiction to being “common”.⁴⁸

The warmth of inclusion in the “real”⁴⁹ community is intensified by the harsh depiction of the affected. Members of this ousted group are considered valid targets for mockery. Flintern in John Guthrie’s *The Little Country* cruelly depicts a successful businessman as a “stuck-up fool”, mocking how he is “lah-di-dah polite”. He warns others to “forget all about your pretty etiquettish frills”.⁵⁰ A reviewer for an opera concert in De Mauny’s novel jokes that most of “the audience had no idea whether the playing was good or bad. They go because it’s a snob occasion”.⁵¹ It is obvious in which of the “them” or “us” one should really aspire to be classed.

The privileging of the community is further evident in the strongly negative images of social aspiration or upward social movement. According to much of the fiction, New Zealand society is socially mobile and lacks strong class boundaries: “offering a fair field and no favour...based rather on achievement than on inheritance”.⁵² Nevertheless, those who have taken advantage of this mobility tend to be deprecated in the fiction. In Scanlan’s novel, Miles wonders why his family do not “pay tribute to him...for the personal success” of starting with “neither money nor family influence” and being eventually titled as a Knight.⁵³ Maybe it is because the characters are aware their creator will eventually “punish” Miles for his “pride in his advancement”. Upon reaching “the supreme objective of his ambition”, Miles’ only son is drowned. Miles has the epiphany, too late, that upon reaching “the supreme objective of his ambition”, “malicious fate had stood in the wings, saying ‘Here it is, but look what comes with it; title and tragedy’”.⁵⁴ Images of the perils of social climbing are an encouragement to remain in the inclusive, favoured community. As the contemporary academic Leslie Lipson observed, the “equalitarianism that provides for all within the group” can indeed “be hostile toward those who reject the group standards or who are outside the

⁴⁸ McCarthy, pp.87-88.

⁴⁹ Escott, p.40.

⁵⁰ Guthrie, pp.44-45.

⁵¹ De Mauny, p.77.

⁵² Scanlan, pp.84-85.

⁵³ Scanlan, p.38.

⁵⁴ Scanlan, pp.178-9.

membership".⁵⁵

The strong contemporary image of community is also a finding made by David Pearson in his research on class imagery in Johnsonville. Pearson revealed how despite remembering "signs of local inequalities...most people also recognised a communality of village life and similarities in status which appeared to demand conformity and blunted social distinctions".⁵⁶ This same recognition is evident in the belittlement throughout the fiction of those who seek social distinction beyond membership in the community. While the use of the adjective "classless" is uncommon, the "community" is implicitly characterised as intrinsically equal. As Scanlan's characters repeatedly stress, "in the community...it did not matter much what you did."⁵⁷

As will be explored later, while this "community" is consistently represented as some kind of middle-ground or group between the privileged and the wealthy, and the poor and the "workers", it is rarely described as "middle-class". With the aid of H.G. Oxley's explanations, the distinctions between intrinsic equality and open competition in images of egalitarianism have been explored in previous chapters. Oxley also argues that there is a "second-level of egalitarianism, community-wide, which unites the lower town strata with the higher".⁵⁸ But the question here is whether the "community-wide" egalitarianism advocated in the fiction is actually seen to unite lower and higher "strata". Society is often represented in the fiction in hierarchical terms. The ideal might be unity and a feeling of "community", but there are many images of stratification. Many characters express awareness of social distinctions and groupings, and people different to themselves. In Marsh's novel, Mrs Claire glances at the lurid magazine photographs of sunbathers and quickly concludes that these "are folk who move in rather *loud* and vulgar *sets*". She distinguishes these lower folk from

⁵⁵ L. Lipson, *The Politics of Equality: New Zealand's Adventures in Democracy*, Chicago, 1948, p.492.

⁵⁶ D.G. Pearson, *Johnsonville: Continuity and Change in a New Zealand Township*, Sydney, 1979, p.130.

⁵⁷ Scanlan, pp.252-3.

⁵⁸ H.G. Oxley, *Mateship in Local Organisation: a Study of Egalitarianism, Stratification, Leadership, and Amenities Projects in a Semi-Industrial Community in Inland New South Wales*, St Lucia, 1974, p.60.

herself with the dismissal that “they are not Our Sort”.⁵⁹ Class may exist in the fiction, as Michael Savage explains, as “a relational construct in which people draw contrasts with others who place themselves above and below them”.⁶⁰ The suggestion is that notions of social distinction and hierarchy, and classlessness and community, are not necessarily incompatible and even connected. In the fictional worlds examined, class distinctions and privileged and affected characters serve to provide contrasting meaning to the egalitarian community and to emphasise the moral superiority of the “common”⁶¹ characters or “real people”.⁶²

Interestingly, while the depiction of the “non-ordinary” or those ranked “above”⁶³ the community is often negative in the fiction, it can also be flattering. In other words, positive images of the superiority of the wealthy and privileged members of society do exist, which challenge the dominant ideals of community. Joy Cunningham in Ballantyne’s novel discusses the ambivalence. She struggles with accepting an egalitarian vision of society or anti-snobbery notions. At first Joy seems to be voicing classless ideals in pointing out that “she disliked nobody as much as she disliked a girl who was snooty about her parents’ position”. But this anti-snobbery takes on a different meaning when she adds that “she never felt superior to any people apart from the Calcotts, and it made her wonder whether some of her classmates looked down on her the way she sometimes couldn’t help looking down on Izzy Calcott”.⁶⁴ Joy expresses some awareness of hierarchical stratification, and a feeling of superiority towards those ranked below her. She also demonstrates how this class-related assumption is only ever weakly articulated. Similarly, while farmer Pencarrow in Scanlan’s novel dreams of building a “fine homestead” and meeting “John Kelly as social equals”, these “ambitions” are “things he never spoke of”.⁶⁵ Perhaps necessarily, social aspiration is articulated covertly in the fiction to avoid contradicting the dominant representation of community ideals.

⁵⁹ Marsh, p.95.

⁶⁰ M. Savage, *Class Analysis and Social Transformation*, Buckingham, 2000, pp.116-17.

⁶¹ McCarthy, pp.87-88.

⁶² Escott, p.40.

⁶³ Savage, pp.116-17.

⁶⁴ Ballantyne, *Cunninghams*, p.212.

⁶⁵ Scanlan, p.37.

In the fiction overall, and even in the images that disapprove of stratification and inequality, New Zealand society is still often perceived in terms of a social hierarchy. If the characters ever explicitly envisage New Zealand as classless and inclusively equal, they often struggle to convince themselves. The protagonist in Charles Allen's *A Poor Scholar* begins with a conviction that "a true democracy reigned in the choir stalls" of his local church where "the rich and the poor meet together". Yet he admits that even though everybody ideally "rubbed shoulders with sons of doctors and sons of tradesmen...there were some of the former who still were free of the draw-net of democracy".⁶⁶ Granted, class is only a minor theme in the majority of the fiction. Equally, though, there is a marked absence of loud claims or explicit images of classlessness. While it is seen as desirable, there seems to be a disinclination among the fictional characters and authors to claim that New Zealand society was equal and classless. Perhaps this is the line drawn by writers aiming both to depict critical reality and to cater to popular ideals.

Social Aspiration and the Exclusive "Society"

The positive attitudes in the fiction towards the wealthy and privileged members of society need closer examination. They provide further insight into this tension between notions of social aspiration and anti-snobbery, and the ambivalent relationship between elitism and egalitarianism explored in chapter six. There is an extensive amount of negative images of privileged and wealthy characters throughout the fiction. The perceived superiority of these kinds of people is often belittled, and those who would overtly seek to join their ranks are prime targets. Yet many of the characters, or their authors, cannot seem to deny that such superior social status is desirable and admirable. Farmer Pencarrow is again a revealing character on this theme, unable to "stifle a feeling of pride that a son of his should have become a noted figure".⁶⁷ His daughter, who "hardly admitted [it] to herself", also "deep

⁶⁶ Allen, pp.73-74.

⁶⁷ Scanlan, pp.30-31.

down...dreamt of luxury, elegance, [and] social prominence".⁶⁸

Overall, the fictional characters and authors seem to be in the same dilemma as another character in Scanlan's novel. A farmer's wife is "torn between two minds" over the employment of a Pencarrow as a farm labourer. While she "was not going to have any young gentleman coming into her house, putting on airs and turning up his nose", she is also aware that the Pencarrow "name was sometimes used impressively to lift her family above the muck and mud".⁶⁹ The fiction displays a tendency to subtly oscillate between criticising snobbery and anyone not in the community on the one hand, and elevating the wealthy and desiring privilege on the other. This is similar to the envy and belittlement of wealthy and privileged members of society in *Truth*. In its vacillation over how to characterise privileged and wealthy members of society, the fiction provides added insight into contemporary notions of superiority and inferiority.

These members of society are measurably superior by being scaled or rated higher than others in terms of some elusive "quality". The assumptions about their superiority noticeably overlap with the assumptions made in the reminiscences and autobiographies about socially and financially successful New Zealanders. Someone who has "got himself a position in life" is regarded by others in Ballantyne's novel as "one of the most important men".⁷⁰ A character who has high "birth and breeding" in Escott's novel is also attributed with a "beautiful life...No corners, only curves".⁷¹ The prestige and privilege of being born into a "beautiful life" or high "position"⁷² is ascribed; accepted as a natural cause and effect. The moral distinction of "cultured", a familiar adjective in the personal sources, is another attribute of these kinds of people. In Allen's novel a "gentlewoman"⁷³ has an enlightening discussion of this term. "I suppose...the most important thing about culture or intellectuality, or whatever you

⁶⁸ Scanlan, p.127.

⁶⁹ Scanlan, p.284.

⁷⁰ Ballantyne, *The Cunninghams*, pp.71-72.

⁷¹ Escott, p.68.

⁷² Anthony, p.46.

⁷³ Allen, p.285.

like to call it, is not to be acquisitive about it. I'm made that way".⁷⁴ Therein lies an acceptable and admired distinction of the privileged and wealthy, or those who are sometimes called the "upper-class".⁷⁵ They are made that way, naturally superior rather than affecting to reach this high status.

Often they are positioned in the separate world of "Society",⁷⁶ about which ordinary characters can only fantasise from a distance. This fictional image is remarkably similar to the portrayal of a distant, exclusive "Society" in the women's pages of *Truth*. In the fiction also, invitations to get more than a glimpse of this distinguished social group are not forthcoming. Definitions of "that more or less inflexible group, known as Society"⁷⁷ are rare, which further cements this group's elusiveness. An office worker in David Ballantyne's story "Girls Must Suffer" gazes at "Beautiful Joyce Cunningham, smartest dresser in Gladston", imagining that she too could be rich and smart "enough to go to parties and dances by people whose names appeared in the *Age* social notes".⁷⁸ Henry Ponce, the factory employee in Gilbert's "Mrs Pornog's Afternoon", also dreams of membership and its associated "cultured beauty, the wit, the ease of position" as he knocks on the door of the prestigious Mrs Pornog's beautiful house.⁷⁹ But upon his entering the house Mrs Pornog promptly kills this social aspirant. It is a dramatic signifier of the impermeability of the boundaries that separate the elite from the ordinary. In contrast to *Truth*, the exclusiveness of "Society" is clearly stated in the fiction.

Lily in McCarthy's novel detachedly observes the contrast between this superior ideal and the common reality. As she watches the "crowd of uncouth neighbours, a concertina and hilarity" at her "common" relation's wedding, Lily thinks "how much better" the wedding would have been at her wealthy husband's "palatial home".⁸⁰ In

⁷⁴ Allen, p.231.

⁷⁵ Escott, p.22.

⁷⁶ See, for example; Scanlan, p.61.

⁷⁷ Scanlan, p.177.

⁷⁸ D. Ballantyne, "Girls Must Suffer" (1949), in P.C. Meikle, ed., *Short Stories by New Zealanders Two*, Auckland, 1972, p.55.

⁷⁹ Gilbert, "Mrs Pornog's Afternoon", pp.55-56.

⁸⁰ McCarthy, p.86.

that world, she imagines, there would have been “an orchestra and dignity, wasp-waisted women floating decorously over polished floors in the arms of suitable partners”.⁸¹ This image of “Society” is typical of the fiction. It is pointedly ephemeral and distant from the mainly rural New Zealand setting and the common majority of the characters. Notions of superiority and inferiority are therefore somewhat ambivalent. On one hand, the “community” is privileged and the inferiority of social climbing and snobbery is stressed throughout the fiction. On the other hand, the intrinsic superiority and prestige of membership in “Society” is emphasised. Nonetheless, in correspondence with *Truth*, the tension in the attributions of prestige is eased by a strong, favourable focus on the ordinary characters or common “community”. “Society” may be seen as superior and exclusive, but its members are largely an excluded or peripheral focus in the fiction examined.

Them-and-Us and “Workers”

Throughout the fiction one hears plenty about the views and lives of the “ordinary”⁸² New Zealander. Conversely, the views and experiences of the privileged or wealthy members of society are only a minor focus, or seen from a distance through the eyes of a member of the “common” community. The distinct impression is of a them-and-us divide: the majority of the fictional characters, authors, and implicitly the audience are part of “us”, while the privileged few are part of “them”. This is clearly similar to the them-and-us division explored in *Truth*. David, the farming protagonist in Escott’s novel, explains the communication barriers between these two groups. He is invited to the wealthy Spences on account of his wife’s connections, and describes how “when I sat and listened to them I knew we weren’t speaking the same language”. The members of this group, he continues, “were at the centre and I was around the outside with the rest of the public”.⁸³

According to the fiction examined, the much more accessible “insider” views of New Zealand society are those of “workers” rather than those of “Society”. In general, the

⁸¹ McCarthy, p.86.

⁸² Ballantyne, *Cunninghams*, p.128.

⁸³ Escott, p.43.

ascribed characteristics of “workers” bear much similarity to previously examined characterisations of “workers”. This points to a widely held assumption of the existence of “workers” in New Zealand during the 1930s and 1940s as the hard-done-by majority in a low, unenviable position. In the fiction, the common attitude of “workers” is to bemoan how others are in a better, easier economic and social position. Concurrently, they also tend to demonstrate pride in their status, which parallels the status attributed to “us workers”⁸⁴ in *Truth*. A character in Frank Sargeson’s story “A Great Day” claims that “I’m all for the working class because I’m a worker myself”, but also concludes that in times like a depression which “hits everyone...an educated bloke has the advantage over a bloke like me”.⁸⁵ David in Escott’s novel contrasts the “separate worlds” of his working life; “the poverty and the hardness and the bitter power that holds men down in the dirt and kicks them where they lie”, with “the beauty and the smoothness” of his wife’s “upper-class” existence.⁸⁶ Yet David also recognises some positive status in his “separate world”, arguing that “I’ve always had to work and it makes me quicker to feel than some”.⁸⁷ The distant, almost superfluous adjectives associated with the privileged and wealthy are in contrast to the staunchly realistic terms in which workers are characterised.

In keeping with much of the previously examined imagery, a dichotomous relationship between workers and the wealthy is invoked throughout a lot of the fiction. The wealthy and privileged are typically characterised as those for whom others work, while workers are those over whom the former rule. A character in Ballantyne’s novel argues that “ordinary jokers” slave “all their lives to fill somebody else’s belly” and that “the rich fat bastards” do “none of the fighting themselves”.⁸⁸ It is a dramatic but common image in the fiction. In Sargeson’s novel and stories, characters frequently bemoan how “a working man gets it put across him every time” by the “big nobbs that

⁸⁴ “Clothing Prices”, Letter to the Editor, by “Soolem Sid”, *Truth*, 14 June 1944, p.9.

⁸⁵ F. Sargeson, “A Great Day” (1940), in V. O’Sullivan, ed., *The Oxford Book of New Zealand Short Stories*, Auckland, 1992, p.73.

⁸⁶ Escott, p.49.

⁸⁷ Escott, pp.72-73.

⁸⁸ Ballantyne, *Cunninghams*, p.128.

run the world".⁸⁹ One of the "well-bred ones" in Escott's novel informs a worker that "you've got to work because that's what you're for".⁹⁰ The "working man" is circumscribed in his lower place. The language used to attack those at the top of the hierarchy, such as "fat bastards" and "big nobbs", is coarsely colloquial and somehow familiarised: the typical articulation of the "working man". Those at the top of the social hierarchy appear remote, impersonalised, and almost caricatured figures from the accessible "ordinary jokers". This further signifies the distance represented in the fiction between the two social groups or strata.

Aesthetic Distinctions and "Workers"

In the area of physical appearance and visual status, the perceived distance between "workers" or the "common" people, and the privileged and wealthy, is somewhat reduced. The assumption that appearance acts as a status marker or innate class distinguisher was an interesting finding in the examination of personal sources in chapter five. The fictional depictions of social distinctions based on physical attributes both extend on, and sometimes significantly diverge from, the same assumption.

One divergence is how workers tend to be envisaged in a much more complimentary manner than in the personal sources. There are still the attractive depictions of privileged characters, such as the handsome and dashing⁹¹ Dennis in McCarthy's novel who takes his "good looks and better prospects...contentedly home to dine with his smart Jewish wife". Nonetheless, if only in the area of appearance, the worker can compete for prestige in the social hierarchy of these fictional worlds. While Dennis observes a farming woman as a "tanned, wrinkled little woman" and supposes that "the rocky state of her finances accounted for her shabbiness", she responds by seeing "merely a stout pompous man of the world".⁹² The working and more privileged characters offer rival contemporary views for what constitutes "better" appearance.

⁸⁹ Sargeson, *That Summer*, pp.155-6.

⁹⁰ Escott, p.68.

⁹¹ McCarthy, p.44.

⁹² McCarthy, p.291.

The them-and-us dichotomy between those who appear to have all the visual status symbols, and those who appear to have nothing, is sometimes defiantly reversed in the fiction. Gilbert's story "A Girl With Ambition" describes a coarse "poor polack" with "red hands", who "thinks she's great" after being promoted from a kitchen-hand to a waitress. The narrator castigates "all you with the assured positions and the cars, having homes on the hills with gardens and a view of the harbour" for laughing at the waitress. The story's moral is that "you can laugh, but your laughter can't get us – we know how crazy beauty is, and you only know soft things".⁹³ Occasionally then, inequality between social groups or strata is visually rectified by positive views from, and of, "us workers". As found in the previous chapter, the apparently lower-ranked workers are sometimes represented by contemporaries as denying "the superiority of people in superordinate groups", and making "counter-claims to moral superiority".⁹⁴

Moreover, the inferior or low status of workers is sometimes compensated for by the attribution of greater physical proportions. This challenges the little-man complex underlying representations of the worker throughout many of the personal sources examined. A whaler is described in McCarthy's novel as a "giant man of action, muscles hardened to iron".⁹⁵ Sargeson's stories are also full of deliberately flattering depictions of the "working class" male as "a big hefty bloke" with a "big body, hard with muscle...over six feet long".⁹⁶ The fiction serves to level the differences of height and build between descriptions of wealthy pioneers and implicitly inferior workers in the personal sources. Appearance can act as an equaliser.

But appearance more often acts as a social or even class distinguisher in the fiction. The poor protagonist in Allen's novel is acutely aware of the differences between a "gentlewoman" and himself: "the texture of her own being was of a similar fineness and he was conscious of his own rough brown hands and stubby shock of hair".⁹⁷

⁹³ G.R. Gilbert, "A Girl With Ambition" (1942), in D. Davin, ed., *Classic New Zealand Short Stories*, Auckland, 1997, p.162.

⁹⁴ Oxley, pp.46-47.

⁹⁵ McCarthy, p.2.

⁹⁶ Sargeson, "A Great Day", pp.72-73.

⁹⁷ Allen, p.131.

Another wealthy “cultured” character is complimented for having the natural “knack of wearing the most ordinary clothes with a certain elusive distinction”.⁹⁸ Two “hardworked women” in Dan Davin’s *Roads From Home* are also distinguished, much less admirably, by their “slow strength and squareness”. Their unfashionable dress is depicted as giving “that air of type, which tempts the passer-by to glance away, dismissing them as no longer attractive”.⁹⁹ Compare this heavy image with the “fine and graceful” “upper-class” Anna in Escott’s novel, who “*looked* as if she’d got everything”.¹⁰⁰ This is awareness of class distinctions at its most obvious or tangible level. Class or social distinction is so apparent, according to these fictional sources, that it can literally be seen.

Such visual depictions of class or social distinctions strengthen the overall findings of this chapter. They especially confirm and clarify the common dichotomy drawn throughout the fiction between rich and poor, or between those who are privileged and those who have little prestige. The beautiful Winifred Herron, whose “exquisite” mother has “gold-touched hair”, wins First Place in Special Painting in Helen Shaw’s story “Noah”. The “ugly” Nina with the “very poor” mother who, “someone told me, goes out washing”, wins nothing.¹⁰¹ She provides a depressing, negative contrast to the story’s ideal image. Such writers might be unaware of their partiality towards attractively describing an upper stratum or group and unflatteringly depicting “workers”, the poor, or the lower stratum. They could also be purposely giving their readers popularly acceptable and expected distinguishers of class. Winifred and Nina might be clearly recognisable or stereotyped “upper” and “working” class representatives.

Those in the “Middle”

Yet how complete is the fictional picture of class and society revealed so far in this chapter? In general, society tends to be represented in the fiction in terms of a social

⁹⁸ Allen, p.213.

⁹⁹ Davin, *Roads*, p.22.

¹⁰⁰ Escott, p.26. (Escott’s emphasis)

¹⁰¹ H. Shaw, “Noah” (1945), in F. Sargeson, ed., *Speaking for Ourselves*, Christchurch, 1945, pp.65-67.

hierarchy. There is a minor focus on the high-low extremes of poverty and privilege, an emphasis on the dichotomous relationship between workers and the wealthy, and a strong concentration on the common, classless "community". The question is whether the "middle-class" is a significant, subtle feature of this fictional representation of New Zealand society.

The question is pertinent because a number of contemporary literary analysts comment on the "middle-class" content of 1930s and 1940s fiction. As discussed in chapter three, in 1940 Eric McCormick praised Robin Hyde's *The Godwits Fly* for depicting an "entirely new stratum of experience", not the "two extremes" of poverty and wealth, but an "intermediate class more typical of New Zealand". The "middle-class household", adds McCormick, is the "ordinary New Zealand".¹⁰² There are examples of this "intermediate" household between the two extremes of poverty and wealth in Hyde's novel. The protagonist explains that her family were relatively "poor, they weren't allowed to talk to tram conductors because tram conductors gave cheek; she wanted the Hannays to be somebody, and she didn't know what, or whom".¹⁰³ Yet the household is never described as "middle-class". Perhaps the class label is an intended inference of "what" or "whom" the Hannays are. For at least a few contemporary readers, the "middle-class" content of such fiction was entirely obvious. What "more complete picture of middle-class society with its own Lilliputian grades and scales of values could be presented than in our New Zealand fiction?" Elizabeth Smith asked in 1939.¹⁰⁴

More modern literary analysts also insist that "middle-class" themes and characters are a strong feature of 1930s and 1940s New Zealand fiction. Paul Day interprets an anti-bourgeois impetus to the protagonist Johnson's solitary existence in John Mulgan's *Man Alone*. Day maintains that because "the middle-class lust to possess has seized on the inhabitants of the country...few think of any other goal but gaining the freehold of

¹⁰² McCormick, *Letters and Art*, p.177.

¹⁰³ Hyde, p.110.

¹⁰⁴ E.M. Smith, *A History of New Zealand Fiction from 1862 to the Present Time, With Some Account of its Relation to the National Life and Character*, Dunedin, 1939, p.68.

a piece of land. It is through his resistance to this idea that Johnson establishes that he is not a bourgeois".¹⁰⁵ There are examples of this goal and Johnson's "resistance" in Mulgan's novel. A union organiser explains to Johnson that "there's going to be a farmers' government, see, with Labour, the fellows in the towns joining up with the fellows in the country and taking things out of the hands of the bankers and the politicians".¹⁰⁶ Johnson refuses to join the Union. The key point is that the use of the terms "middle-class" and "bourgeois" are absent in the novel, even though a dichotomy is once again implied. The author may be presuming that his readers will recognise the subtle references; that they will instantly classify bankers and politicians, and their possessive tendencies, as "middle-class". Nonetheless, the rhetoric is apparently unnecessary or inapplicable in the fictional context.

Perhaps only the term "middle-class", rather than what it signifies, is presumed unimportant. Modern literary analyst David Dowling maintains that Sargeson's story "The Hole that Jack Dug" is "pervaded by a kind of subdued class war" between the "working-class" Jack and his wife, "whose aspirations are distinctly middle-class". Sargeson or his characters never use the term "middle-class", and Dowling risks making over-inferences using present-day terminology. Ignoring the modern terms, though, he does have a point when he observes the "obvious contrast" between the worker Jack and his wife. According to Dowling, Mrs Parker "expresses herself socially through the middle-class rituals of tea and talk", while Jack "gulps his tea down hot and enjoys with Tom the working-class camaraderie of silent, shared labour".¹⁰⁷ Although Sargeson's story is not so explicitly class-saturated as Dowling concludes, the characters are aware of social or cultural distinctions. The poor quarry-worker Jack himself agrees that his educated wife is somehow "far too good for him, a girl with her brains and refinement", and in a higher position than himself.¹⁰⁸ The suggestion is that there are fictional characters, other than "workers", lurking in the gap between poverty and privilege.

¹⁰⁵ Day, p.67.

¹⁰⁶ Mulgan, pp.47-48.

¹⁰⁷ Dowling, p.176.

¹⁰⁸ F. Sargeson, "The Hole That Jack Dug" (1945), in M. McLeod & B. Manhire, eds, *Some Other Country: New Zealand's Best Short Stories*, Wellington, 1992, p.66.

It may be more than a coincidence that the fiction examined is so strongly focused on describing the “common”¹⁰⁹ community, and that contemporary reviewers distinguished the fictional picture of society as strongly “middle-class”. Nonetheless, in distinguishing the “community” or those in the “middle”, the contemporary fictional writers examined seem to find the traditional class rhetoric inapplicable. This is similar to the recognition of the urban social commentators discussed in chapter five that “it is impossible to determine where the ‘middle’ class begins or where it ends”.¹¹⁰ Paul Simpson, for example, stressed the problem of deciding what “makes a man ‘middle’ class”, and whether it should be based on such markers as his “his bank book, his job, his education, [or] his ancestry”.¹¹¹ Judging by the frequency of vague descriptions and distinctions such as “brains and refinement”,¹¹² the fictional writers may have been struggling with a similar problem. It seems as if the decision was in some ways left up to the reader. It remains uncertain whether those in between the poor and the privileged, or workers and the wealthy, are perceived as an undistinguished part of the “community” or a subtly dominant and recognisable “middle” class or stratum. Literary reviews consistently draw the latter inference; in hindsight, it might seem obvious to “us”. A number of contemporary reviewers such as Smith and McCormick were also very sure about the “middle-class” content of the fiction. Ultimately, in the contemporary fiction examined, the existence of the “middle-class” or some kind of a middle stratum remains an inference only.

Class and Race

The existence of another group of New Zealanders, usually completely neglected in the other sets of sources examined, is also given scant attention in the fiction. While masculine pronouns and characters such as the “working man”¹¹³ are again frequent, women are relatively well represented in the fictional class images. Yet where Maori or other ethnic minorities fit in these European perceptions of class and society is

¹⁰⁹ McCarthy, pp.87-88.

¹¹⁰ P.H. Simpson, *If You'd Care to Know: Non-Fiction*, Auckland, 1946, p.132.

¹¹¹ Simpson, p.132.

¹¹² Sargeson, “The Hole That Jack Dug”, p.66.

¹¹³ Sargeson, *That Summer*, pp.155-6.

generally unanswerable. The few efforts to include Maori in discussion of social distinctions and inequality tend to be limited by two prevalent assumptions. One is that between European and Maori there “was no common ground on which we could meet”.¹¹⁴ The other is that Maori are “nothing but a pack of savages”.¹¹⁵ There is an interesting exception to these assumptions. McCarthy’s novel contains a main character who is wealthy, prestigious, and Maori. This clearly drawn character has not been encountered throughout this study of the various contemporary sources of class imagery. Maori are usually either represented as poor workers, part of a segregated traditional community, peripheral class members, or as invisible. McCarthy’s portrayal of Iwikau is worth examining.

This chief’s son, who had much power and prestige amongst his own race, is apparently notable for having a European education, which is described as “a smattering of knowledge, a little battered culture, a European wardrobe and habits, faultless manners, and an Oxford accent”. With such attributes, and having “the most imposing residence in the district”, Iwikau “lavishly” entertained Europeans and Maori alike.¹¹⁶ At first glance, it would seem that McCarthy has envisaged a contemporary New Zealander who is easily at the privileged top of the hierarchy of both races; “with his education and wealth...received and welcomed by everybody”.¹¹⁷

Nonetheless, one soon discovers the recurring perception that “friendship between pakeha and Maori must necessarily be limited”.¹¹⁸ Iwikau is described by Lily, a fictional European character whom he desperately wishes to marry, as an amusing “savage with an Oxford accent...not to be considered matrimonially”.¹¹⁹ Lily is singularly focused on marrying a rich man and becoming a member of “Society”, yet

¹¹⁴ D. Stewart, “The Whare” (1944), in D. Davin, ed., *Classic New Zealand Short Stories*, Auckland, 1997, p.171.

¹¹⁵ A.P. Gaskell, “School Picnic” (1947), in D. Davin, *Classic New Zealand Short Stories*. Auckland, 1997, p.193.

¹¹⁶ McCarthy, pp.71-72.

¹¹⁷ McCarthy, p.114.

¹¹⁸ McCarthy, p.114.

¹¹⁹ McCarthy, p.51.

she fails to explain why the wealthy Iwikau cannot supply these attributes. It is taken for granted that the reader will accept or at least understand why Iwikau is disqualified. At least in McCarthy's novel, an assumption of the inherent racial exclusiveness of membership in "Society" is evident. Iwikau is given all the surface requirements for membership of the prestigious group or stratum, and then is cruelly rejected by Lily and the European "Society". Race and class are indeed typically divorced in these fictional images.

Summary

In 1939, Elizabeth Smith declared that there is "very little trace" of "class consciousness" in New Zealand fiction. The "limited range of society in New Zealand", Smith summarised, "allows little room for any feelings of inferiority, though they crept in occasionally, only to be rebutted firmly by the national creed that Jack's as good as his master".¹²⁰ While class is hardly a preoccupation of the fiction, the findings of this chapter suggest that Smith underestimated the contemporary tension between the national creed and the feeling in 1930s and 1940s New Zealand fiction.

If the fictional writers were not explicitly conscious of "class", many appear to have been well aware of the existence of social hierarchy and social distinctions in New Zealand society. While the range of society in New Zealand may have been limited, fictional writers evidently recognised the existence of different groups or hierarchically ordered strata. The poor, the "workers", the "common" community, the wealthy and the privileged, and members of "Society" all repeatedly feature in these sources as fictional representatives or stereotypes of contemporary New Zealand society. Since there are no neat or precise distinctions between these groups, and few consistently used or clearly defined labels such as "middle-class", it is difficult to tell whether fictional writers saw society explicitly in terms of "classes". At the same time, in contrast to many of the contemporaries previously examined, most of these fictional writers did not insist that New Zealand society was classless or only horizontally

¹²⁰ Smith, pp.66-67.

distinguished.

Certainly, the preferred focus of the fiction is on the common "community" and particularly on "workers". In general, the fictional creed is that members of the community are as good as, or even better than, the wealthy and privileged members of society. Despite implications of their subordination and low economic status, workers are given a well-heard voice and attributed with a degree of social status. Throughout the fiction, while elements of snobbery, affectation, and inequality in the New Zealand context are recognised, they are also strongly deprecated.

Yet the fictional writers seem to have struggled to master the feeling that those with privilege and wealth were somehow superior to those without. These types of people are repeatedly despised and desired throughout the fiction for their attractive appearances, their "cultured" lifestyles, and their disproportionate amount of wealth in comparison to the majority. Fictional writers seemed to have vacillated over which of the "them-and-us" were actually more prestigious: the wealthy or the "workers", or "Society" or the "common" community.

Much of the fiction examined was acclaimed in its time for its realistic portrayal of New Zealand society, or at least for its depiction of popular social beliefs and ideals. Arguably, it serves to indicate the kinds of rhetoric, ideologies, and problems related to social distinction and inequality that were apparently observable in New Zealand society during the 1930s and 1940s. The desire for an equal society in which no one was inferior, and the recognition of social distinctions and hierarchy, were two issues that these fictional writers, and perhaps contemporaries themselves, struggled to reconcile.

Chapter 8

Conclusion

If class is found to matter to people, Michael Savage argues, “then this is a powerful reason to defend class analysis, whatever the theoretical problems of class analysis may be”.¹ The hermeneutic and methodological problems of class imagery analysis; of a present-day researcher attempting to understand how “insiders” in the past understood an inherently complex subject, have been continually confronted² throughout each chapter. The question that now needs addressing is whether and how class was found to matter to the New Zealanders examined in this thesis.

Although it might be tempting to make neat summaries and generalisations about all the various findings, one must be very careful not to repeat the mistakes of the historiography. As is often critically observed of previous class imagery research, the desire to find “easily obtainable and easily quantifiable results”,³ resulted in the data being oversimplified, if not “grossly distorted”.⁴ The aim to build a “cultural map of class”⁵ was outlined in chapter one. The subsequent chapters have served to reveal how, to paraphrase Ian Reid, the territory this map charts ultimately has some obscure regions and no plainly marked boundaries.⁶ In the end, there is no one picture of what class meant to contemporaries, and instead a multiplicity of often ambivalent and ambiguous ideas. Critically inferring the purposes and potential biases of all the different sources examined has made it easier to understand why so many different images of class were found. The structure of the

¹ M. Savage, *Class Analysis and Social Transformation*, Buckingham, 2000, p.23.

² This confrontation, as Jerry Lembcke stresses, is crucial to any class analysis. See: J. Lembcke, “Class Analysis and Studies of the U.S. Working Class: Theoretical, Conceptual, and Methodological Issues”, in S.G. McNall, R.F. Levine, & R. Fantasia, eds, *Bringing Class Back in: Contemporary and Historical Perspectives*, Colorado, 1991, pp.83-97.

³ J.H. Goldthorpe & D. Lockwood, “Affluence and the British Class Structure”, *Sociological Review*, 11, 2, (1963), p.145.

⁴ P. Hiller, “The Nature and Social Location of Everyday Conceptions of Class”, *Sociology*, 9, 1, (1975), p.6.

⁵ A. Marwick, *Class: Image and Reality in Britain, France, and the USA Since 1930*, Houndmills, 1990, p.12.

⁶ I. Reid, *Fiction and the Great Depression: Australia and New Zealand, 1930-1950*, Melbourne, 1979, p.ix.

thesis serves to demonstrate the wide range of contemporary voices and views considered: from academic, official, and political views, to personal, informal, and perhaps elitist views, to populist, popular, and apparently critically realistic views. Depending on the contemporary source consulted, New Zealand society in the 1930s and 1940s was seen as classless, homogeneous, and intrinsically equal, or largely middle-class and socially mobile, or highly unequal and hierarchically ordered. Contemporaries themselves admitted the difficulty of ascertaining the meaning of class rhetoric, and observed the “innumerable”⁷ and “amorphous”⁸ groupings and distinctions that apparently characterised the social structure. The unclear definition or imprecise measurement of the contemporary significance of class is at least one element of the “map” that is broadly recognisable to both contemporary and present-day New Zealanders. In some ways, then, in order to appreciate rather than simplify the variation in contemporary class imagery, the specific findings of each chapter must be left to speak for themselves.

Yet the very diversity of the class images makes the reoccurrence or endurance of several common themes throughout the different chapters and sources even more interesting. The uniqueness and richness of these general findings is evident when comparing the general findings of the historiography summarised in chapter two. The two accounts of stratification within 1930s and 1940s society are broadly similar. For example, the stronger emphasis on egalitarianism and classlessness rather than class, the tendency to neglect issues of race and gender in discussions of class, and the blurring of the distinctions between contemporary ideals and actualities of class, are common to both the secondary and primary works examined. In some important ways, however, the contemporary accounts are different from and much more detailed than the historiography’s account.

One point of divergence is striking. The tendency of researchers to adopt the model of a three-class classification of the social structure is almost invariably not shared by the contemporaries examined. Certainly, researchers such as James Belich have stressed the vagueness and fluidity of the boundaries and distinctions between “working” or “lower”, “middle”, and “upper” classes in twentieth-century New

⁷ G. Cope, *Christians in the Class Struggle*, Wellington, 1944, pp.12-13.

⁸ E. Beaglehole, “Race, Caste and Class”, *Journal of the Polynesian Society*, 52, 1, (1943), pp.8-9.

Zealand. Yet even the assumption that these terms are applicable in the context of the 1930s and 1940s is strongly challenged by the contemporary rhetoric.

The term "class" was only infrequently used in the sources, let alone class labels such as "upper-class" or "lower-class". New Zealand's social structure was characterised, according to the various contemporaries examined, by the "poorer classes", "workers", the "labouring class", the "working-classes", the "wage-earning class", a classless community or the "average" middle majority, the "middle-class", the "wealthy", the "privileged classes", an elite "Society", the "farming class", or no classes at all. Contemporaries vaguely talked about "grades", "positions", "sections of the community", "strata", "classes", and the "social scale". The key point of citing all this rhetoric is to convey the diversity and inconsistency of how social groups and individuals were distinguished. Contemporaries evidently struggled over finding the relevance or applicability of traditional or overseas rhetoric such as "proletariat" and "class" itself. According to these "insider" sources, no matter how many allowances are made for fluidity and ambiguity in the distinctions and boundaries, a three-class classification is the wrong "class" frame or analytical model for 1930s and 1940s New Zealand society. By putting aside any *a priori* assumption about the relevance of this traditional European model, one can appreciate the wide range of contemporary interpretations of social hierarchy, dichotomy, and a horizontally ordered society.

Another related difference between the historiographical and "insider" accounts is how contemporaries consistently do not recognise, or place little importance on describing, the "middle-class". Researchers of twentieth-century New Zealand such as Belich, David Pearson, and David Thorns assume the existence and even centrality of the "middle-class". They even specifically subdivide the "middle-class" into categories like "new middle class" and "lower middle class". The term "middle-class", let alone the subdivisions, is rarely mentioned in the contemporary sources examined. Erik Olssen points out that the "middle-class" existed during the 1930s and 1940s as "a stratum without a name".⁹ Yet contemporaries stressed how the traditional term "middle-class" was hardly relevant in describing those more

⁹ E. Olssen, "Towards a New Society", in G.W. Rice, ed., *The Oxford History of New Zealand*, Auckland, 1992, p.273.

“average” New Zealanders who were positioned in terms of lifestyle and wealth between the very rich and the very poor. Occasionally it is asserted that the members of the “middle-class” were characteristic, representative, or typical New Zealanders. Overall, though, the contemporaries examined are nowhere near as focused on the “middle-class” as some present-day researchers of twentieth-century New Zealand appear to be. Notably, Belich himself points out that using “broad horizontal categories such as class does risk papering over subtleties and differences”, but emphasises the need to “impose meaning” on historical “chaos”.¹⁰ Indeed, subtle and varying interpretations of New Zealand’s social structure as largely classless, or as a hierarchy dominated by the dichotomous relationship between “workers” and the wealthy or privileged, were found to be overwhelming in the sources examined. It is interesting that this relationship, which many contemporaries saw as fundamental to understanding the distinctions and inequality in 1930s and 1940s society, is barely a focus in the historiography.

The underlying issue that has repeatedly arisen in this study is whether the contemporary vagueness and reticence in discussing social distinctions and inequality is due to the perceived actual lack of class or more the desire to avoid discussing a contentious subject. Throughout most of the sources, the predominance of egalitarian rhetoric and ideology threaten to make extinct even the weak currency of the term “class”. To some extent, then, the findings of this study are similar to the conclusion of the other few local studies of class imagery; that although “New Zealanders *do* recognise inequalities and forms of social differentiation” their class imagery “is invariably inchoate and heavily influenced by ideologies of egalitarianism and community”.¹¹ The intersections and incongruities between images of a largely classless, socially mobile, and egalitarian community, and images of a hierarchically ordered and highly unequal society, are an absorbing feature of this thesis. A number of contemporaries recognised the gap between apparent ideals and actualities of class. Undoubtedly, most of the contemporaries examined seemed to want a society in which there were few disparities of wealth and privilege, and no strong distinctions of class. A

¹⁰ Belich, p.126.

¹¹ D.G. Pearson & D.C. Thorns, *Eclipse of Equality: Social Stratification in New Zealand*, Sydney, 1983, p.254.

popularly expressed ideal was intrinsic equality or at least equality of opportunity. An overwhelming number of the contemporaries maintained that their society closely approximated the ideal, especially in comparison with the rigidity of the British social structure. In the context of the 1930s and 1940s, the general finding of Pearson and Thorns on how “few New Zealanders exhibit high levels of class consciousness” and “see their society in terms of class conflict,”¹² seems to be entirely accurate. Emphases on community, harmony, and homogeneity tend to override assumptions of class conflict and consciousness. Nonetheless, these contemporaries’ awareness of social distinctions and inequality between social groups suggests how the dominant ideal was not also a widespread reality. The implicit and enduring recognition throughout the sources was that the aim of “social levelling” and the ideal of classlessness had yet to be achieved.

The low economic status of “workers” seemed to be the Achilles heel in contemporaries’ attempts to portray their society as largely classless and equal. In comparison with the historiography, the contemporaries examined seem to be much stronger in their emphasis on the subordination and suffering of workers. Yet their arguments about workers are typically limited by the failure to specify whether this generic category refers to all wage-earners, or implicitly only to manual labourers. Although the term “working-class” was infrequently used, workers were often characterised as poor and lacking in occupational, but not necessarily social, status. The historiography also made a similar characterisation. A popular contemporary belief was that “workers” were deserving of sympathy and governmental benevolence, and were archetypal, even morally superior members of the New Zealand community. A common assumption was that workers existed in a dichotomous, disempowering relationship with a wealthy, privileged minority. This is slightly similar to the point made by researchers about the emerging consciousness of the “working-class” electorate during the period and their observation that the “lower classes...learnt to hate the governing classes” in the depression. Explicit statements in the historiography about politics during the 1930s and 1940s, such as “Labour was a class party”¹³ and New Zealand “had

¹² Pearson & Thorns, p.252.

¹³ E. Olssen, “The ‘Working Class’ in New Zealand”, *New Zealand Journal of History* (NZJH), 8, 1, (1974), p.46.

a class based two-party system”,¹⁴ are uncommon in the primary sources examined. However, many contemporaries emphasised that the inequality and distinctions between capital and labour, or the “exploiting class” and “workers”, were recognisable influences in politics. The historiography places a weaker emphasis on the political significance in the 1930s and 1940s of the relationship between “capital” and “labour”. The difference may have much to do with the apparent receptiveness of a number of contemporaries to traditional Marxist class rhetoric and theory, and the increasing unpopularity of Marxist analysis among present-day researchers.

An important finding of this study is the widespread assumption among the contemporaries examined about how workers constituted a majority social grouping. If workers were the subordinated majority, poorly positioned in relation to a privileged minority, then contemporaries are effectively saying that inequality was extensive. The interesting finding, particularly of the official sources, is how explanation for the dominant focus on workers was often absent or only subtly implied. Perhaps inequality and stratification had to be downplayed, or only alluded to, in order to avoid contradicting ideals of classlessness and egalitarianism.

Possibly given the strong focus on subjective data, the information revealed in this study about reactions to social welfare legislation and the government during the 1930s and 1940s is much more diverse and detailed than in the historiography. Researchers make statements about how welfare legislation was aimed at a “levelling upwards” and “reduced burdens and insecurities and expanded opportunities” for the urban “working-class”.¹⁵ In the primary sources examined there were three different contemporary reactions to the aims and achievements of the government’s welfare legislation during the 1930s and 1940s. The government was praised for extensively protecting and providing for workers. A related popular view was that New Zealand had achieved, or was at least aiming to achieve, a classless or socially “levelled” society. Then again, the government was also often heavily criticised for failing to remedy the disparity of wealth and power

¹⁴ Pearson & Thorns, p.141.

¹⁵ C. Griffen, “Towards an Urban Social History for New Zealand”, NZJH, 20, 2, (1986), p.121.

between a selfish, privileged, and wealthy minority and the suffering worker majority. Conversely, a number of contemporaries also complained that the government's social welfare legislation had created, or would create, a society in which the indolent, selfish workers took away the disproportionate but justifiable wealth and power of the minority. In regards to the 1930s and 1940s, and New Zealand's history in general, this egalitarian attitude about workers and welfare legislation is barely explored in the historiography. In her research on wealth and income distribution from 1870 to 1939, Margaret Galt concludes that the "evidence suggests that New Zealand was correctly portrayed as having a high level of wealth with an egalitarian distribution".¹⁶ It is interesting that so many contemporaries, while insisting on the lack of wide disparity between rich and poor, still criticised how wealth, power, and privilege were distributed highly unequally.

The many contemporary references to economic inequality and social distinctions cannot be ignored. They are not automatically invalid simply because egalitarian rhetoric and ideology were found to be so dominant throughout all the different sources. In the class imagery examined, as H.G. Oxley also found, egalitarianism, "widely seen as the antithesis of any kind of hierarchy", is often coexistent with the "contrasting phenomena of social stratification".¹⁷ The evident gap between the professed aim and the actual achievement of classlessness, or between the ideal and the recognised reality of egalitarianism, is one of the most important and consistent findings of this study.

The oscillation in contemporary attitudes towards those with privilege and those without is another significant finding. Researchers mostly fail to discuss the relationship between notions of social aspiration and elitism and anti-snobbery and egalitarianism in the New Zealand historical context. These apparently conflicting and incompatible notions were particularly evident in the more popular or less official personal, media, and fictional sources. Contemporary attitudes towards the assets of privilege, power, or wealth were often critical and derisive, but also

¹⁶ M.N. Galt, "Wealth and Income in New Zealand, c.1870 to c.1939", PhD thesis, Victoria University of Wellington, 1985, abstract.

¹⁷ H.G. Oxley, *Mateship in Local Organisation: a Study of Egalitarianism, Stratification, Leadership, and Amenities Projects in a Semi-Industrial Community in Inland New South Wales*, University of Queensland Press, St Lucia, 1974, preface.

acquisitive and admiring. Perhaps consequently, and as outlined above, characterisations of the different “grades”, groups, or “classes”, and reactions to the apparent hierarchical or inequalitarian distribution of these assets, tended to vary. Depending on whether one consulted the editor of *Truth*, a Labour politician, a successful pioneer, a polemicist, or a fictional novel, “workers”, the “privileged”, and the “common community” were variously distinguished as morally superior and morally inferior.

According to the historiography, high levels of wealth and both achieved and ascribed prestige solidified the position of the upper strata at the top of the social hierarchy. Yet researchers such as Galt also emphasise the degree of strong upward social mobility during this period and the fact that the upper strata were not a closed elite. Researchers point out how the privileged tended to lead an inconspicuous lifestyle, thereby disguising the gaps between rich and poor. These three observations apparently illustrate the egalitarian distribution of wealth in, and more fluid structuring of, New Zealand society during the 1930s and 1940s.

Contemporaries provide much variation on these three observations. Certainly, snobbery and affectation, social climbing, and inherited privilege are all critically targeted throughout many of the sources. Upward social mobility or social betterment are emphasised as obtainable for all. Class distinctions and boundaries are often depicted as fluid or nonexistent. This serves to strengthen the popular argument about the considerable extent to which 1930s and 1940s New Zealand society was egalitarian and classless. However, the argument is contradicted by uncritical images of the inherent high status of the wealthy and privileged minority, and the innate superiority of their “cultured” and physical attributes. If the “upper strata” were disguising or downplaying their elite lifestyle during the 1930s and 1940s, perhaps the numerous contemporaries in this study who envied and belittled the wealth and privilege of a minority were especially perceptive. Particularly throughout the media and fictional sources, the existence of an elite “Society”, to which membership was implicitly ascribed and unattainable for the “common” majority, was discussed. That this elite group in an ostensibly egalitarian society is not only not criticised in these sources but also morally defended and exalted is a fascinating incongruity in contemporary reactions towards inequality. This study

thus serves to reveal how a number of New Zealanders during this period clearly did not believe in intrinsic equality or actually desire equality of opportunity and outcomes.

There is some unanimity between these mostly European researchers' and contemporaries' discussions of gender and race and their relation to class in this period. Notably, this issue receives scant attention in both the secondary and primary works. As inferred throughout the study, the paucity of information is arguably because images of gender and racial inequality do not sit well with the traditionally favoured interpretation of an egalitarian society. In general, both groups of European commentators seem to agree that in the 1930s and 1940s Maori were "essentially a subordinate rural based minority...a peripheral grouping in spatial and economic terms" to a "European dominated society".¹⁸ If they ever discussed the connections, the contemporaries tended to assume that Maori were a segregated community, or peripheral members of a European community, or equivalent in status to subordinated European workers. An interesting idiosyncrasy is how a number of the mostly European contemporaries, while rejecting the term "class" in describing European society, apparently had no qualms about applying traditional European class terminology in their descriptions of Maori society. The historiography briefly mentions the "disadvantaged position of women"¹⁹, and argues that the "central zone" of New Zealand society around this time was a "male domain...from which women were kept remote".²⁰ A few of the personal, media, and fictional sources suggested some connections between femininity and class, but the central focus of the majority of the sources is implicitly on a male, European society. While issues of race and gender are not the central focus of this study, it is significant that they tend to be such a remote concern in the class images of contemporaries and researchers.

In the beginning of this study the question of whether and how class mattered to people in 1930s and 1940s New Zealand was put forward. While "class", as a category and as a description of social relationships, social distinctions, and economic inequality, may have been only a minor concern for many, it still tended

¹⁸ Pearson & Thorns, p.203.

¹⁹ I. Reid, p.116.

²⁰ I. Reid, p.117.

to have contemporary resonance. For some of the contemporaries examined, class provided a contrast to show what their society was not, or a foreign yardstick against which to favourably measure local distinctions and inequality. For others, class signified problematic social and economic divisions and distinctions between “workers” and the “capitalist class”, rich and poor, and the “privileged class” and the common community. For many, class rhetoric such as “proletariat”, “upper-class”, and the term “class” itself was irrelevant or too contentious to employ and define in the contemporary context. “Class” seems to have been considered a term with unwanted connotations of snobbery, rigidity, radicalism, or conflict. Instead, contemporaries tended to prefer making moral and cultural distinctions based on notions of respectability and superiority of character, which suggests the power of the conviction that New Zealand society was free of class. The contention of this thesis is that many contemporaries were consciously or unconsciously reacting to, and demonstrating the inheritance of, traditional class rhetoric and theories. Elements of nineteenth-century British notions of respectability and the “middle-class”, early European settler ideals of egalitarianism and the perceived rigidity of Britain’s class structure, and traditional Marxist class analysis, were detectable in the sources examined. If only in relation to the 1930s and 1940s, this study suggests the weight of a long-standing rhetorical tradition of class and the endurance of traditional egalitarian ideology in New Zealand’s social history.

It has been assumed by a number of academics that class is now an unrewarding, anachronistic,²¹ and even lifeless subject for research, and particularly in the New Zealand context. The analysis of class imagery has been advanced in this thesis as a way of revealing the tenuousness of the assumption. These sources provide important subjective information about a woefully under-explored issue and period in New Zealand’s social history. In general, the overwhelming tendency in the historiography is to emphasise the strength of egalitarian ideology and the vague existence of stratification. At least according to many researchers, class is considered to be of only “minor and passing interest” throughout New Zealand’s history.²² The question over whether past and present New Zealanders themselves

²¹ L. Reissman, *Class in American Society*, Glencoe, 1959, p.8.

²² D. Bedggood, *Rich and Poor in New Zealand: a Critique of Class, Politics, and Ideology*, Auckland, 1980, p.49.

consider class to be more than merely a minor and passing interest has mostly been sidestepped. This thesis demonstrates how in the 1930s and 1940s, a number of New Zealanders clearly considered class and related issues of economic inequality and social distinction meaningful enough to criticise and reject, accept and endorse, or simply attempt to describe and define.

Notwithstanding the limitations of class imagery analysis, the sources examined were rich in information about past ideals and perceived problems related to and about class. This study provides a small but valuable contribution to the deconstruction and understanding of national myths and mentalities related to classlessness, egalitarianism, and stratification. The researcher should not be intimidated by the ambiguity and variation in responses to the question of how people in the past perceived and represented the society in which they lived. Nor should one be deterred by what Belich describes as “power of the myth of classlessness”²³ in New Zealand, which in some ways makes the analysis of class imagery all the more interesting. Indeed, if judging by the secondary and primary works examined here, Pearson is correct in claiming that in local “class imagery” analysis the explication of the meanings attached to such concepts as “class” and “egalitarianism” displays a complexity and richness of detail often totally missed by other forms of data acquisition.²⁴ If only in terms of its subjective significance, to write “class” out of New Zealand history may be to disregard or misunderstand a potentially significant theme²⁵ and area of research. To quote contemporary literary analyst Elizabeth Smith, “that this contribution to the understanding of the life in New Zealand was for the most part given unconsciously by the writers” makes it “of all the greater value”.²⁶ That only a few other researchers have focused on providing this kind of knowledge arguably also underscores the value of this thesis.

²³ Belich, p.126.

²⁴ D.G. Pearson, “Class, Status and Reminiscence: a Research Note”, NZJH, 3, 1, (1979), p.87.

²⁵ D. Cannadine, *Class in Britain*, Penguin, London, 2000, p.23.

²⁶ E.M. Smith, *A History of New Zealand Fiction From 1862 to the Present Time, With Some Account of its Relation to the National Life and Character*, Dunedin, 1939, p.7.

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Structure of Bibliography

Section I: Primary Sources
Chapters 3-7

Section II: Secondary Sources
Chapters 1-8

Note

Given that conclusions and inferences are made about the “sets of sources” examined throughout each chapter, all primary sources, including those directly quoted and those to which only general or indirect references were made, are referenced. The first section of the bibliography is comprised of separate chapter bibliographies of all the primary works that were examined. An asterisk (*) next to a primary reference indicates that the source was also quoted. The second section includes all the secondary works that were cited throughout the study.

SECTION I: PRIMARY SOURCES **(Chapters 3-7)**

CHAPTER 3: Academic and Polemical “Class” Imagery

As discussed in chapter three, a brief note of the authors’ “academic” criteria: the educative or academic posts held during the 1930s and 1940s and/or university qualifications, is included where applicable in each reference.

Abbreviations

University of Auckland	AU
University of Canterbury	CU
University of Otago	OU
Victoria University of Wellington	VUW

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CHAPTER 4: Official and Political "Class" Imagery

Abbreviation:

Appendices to the Journals of the House of Representatives AJHR

Department of Statistics, *Official New Zealand Yearbooks*, Government Printer, Wellington.

Yearbook Sample:

1930*, 1932*, 1934, 1936, 1938, 1940*, 1942*, 1944, 1946, 1948.

Yearbook Sections Examined:

VIII	Education
XXV	Social Security, Pensions, Superannuation & c.
XXXV	Incomes and Income tax
XXXVII	Wages and Hours of Labour
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CHAPTER 5: Personal "Class" Imagery

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